

# *Interpreting the Dimensions of Daily Life for the Slaves Living at the President's House and at Mount Vernon*

THE ATTEMPT TO CHARACTERIZE THE LIVING CONDITIONS and the daily activities of the enslaved workers who lived at the President's House in Philadelphia during George Washington's period of residence there represents only the latest chapter in what has developed as a virtual growth industry in American historic-site interpretation. Over the last two decades, as both general and scholarly interest in knowing more of the details of the slavery experience in early America have grown nationwide, the story of the role of the enslaved workers at some of the country's most visited historic sites has taken on greater significance as well. Thankfully, the days when historic-site administrators reacted to visitor interest in such matters with unease and even defensive dissembling are for the most part in the past. But the means to answer such questions in an informed and informative manner are not necessarily readily available, and the research needed to provide the basis for interpreting slavery quite often has been hindered by a lack of documentary and physical evidence. For the President's House, considerable information exists in the form of official and personal correspondence, visitors' accounts, and relatively detailed descriptions of the layout of the property dating from 1773, circa 1781, and 1798. It was by synthesizing the combined documentary evidence, and in particular by carefully analyzing a plan of the property that was made sometime after the house was severely damaged in a fire in January 1780, that Edward Lawler Jr. developed the fullest interpretation of the functional uses of the President's House and its associated buildings and spaces.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The literature relating to the interpretation of slavery at historic sites is extensive. For a recent review, see Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology*

Archaeological investigations have proven crucially informative in assisting in this type of analysis at many sites over the last twenty years. These even include those properties like Mount Vernon, George Washington's Virginia plantation home, where the documentary record is rich. Even so, important insights have been derived from the analysis of well-preserved archaeological remains. For the President's House, basic questions remain as to the use of the various back-buildings known to have existed on the site, and in particular pertaining to which of those structures may have served as domestic spaces for the enslaved members of the Washington household. In addition, if well-preserved domestic artifacts associated with the slaves could be found and analyzed, potentially significant insights would likely be gained relating to the material dimensions of the daily lives of those individuals. For example, food remains have been particularly informative in determining the diet of slaves and in helping to understand the degree of autonomy enjoyed by slaves in different contexts.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, data pertaining to slavery at the President's House that is based on the archaeological record is virtually nonexistent. This is largely due to the fact that much of the site was heavily disturbed by various construction efforts that took place after the President's House was demolished in 1832. Finally, as part of the creation of Independence Mall historical park, the subsequent buildings and any above ground vestiges of the President's House complex that may have survived were demolished in 1951. As part of this development of the mall, in 1954 the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania built a restroom squarely on the site of the President's House. No archaeological investigations were carried out as part of any of this work, and according to documentation from the 1950s, the entire area was excavated to a depth of four feet below the

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in *Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, DC, 2002). The most comprehensive interpretive document that has been prepared for the President's House is Edward Lawler Jr., "The President's House in Philadelphia: The Rediscovery of a Lost Landmark," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 26 (2002): 5–95.

<sup>2</sup> For a full treatment of the archaeological findings relating to the Mount Vernon slaves, see Dennis J. Pogue, "Slave Lifeways at Mount Vernon: An Archaeological Perspective," in *Slavery at the Home of George Washington*, ed. Philip J. Schwarz (Mount Vernon, VA, 2001), 110–35. For a consideration of the many issues relating to interpreting the overall site, and in particular focusing on questions pertaining to the activities of the enslaved workers, see "Consensus Document from the President's House Roundtable," prepared by Doris Devine Fanelli, <http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/controversy/consensus.htm>.

adjacent curb elevations.<sup>3</sup>

In 2000, the National Park Service carried out an archaeological survey within the construction footprint of the site slated for the new Liberty Bell Center. The area under investigation did not include the site of the President's House itself, but it did cover a portion of the extreme south end of the lot. An octagonal-shaped, stone-lined shaft, roughly thirteen feet in diameter, was revealed at that time. This shaft has been interpreted to be the pit associated with an icehouse that was built circa 1781 by the property owner, Robert Morris. Only the bottom nine feet of the shaft remained, and since it was described by Morris in a letter to George Washington in 1784 as 18 feet deep, it appears that in this area at least the site had been disturbed to a depth of as much as nine feet. At this time there are no plans to carry out additional archaeological investigations at the site.<sup>4</sup>

While the potential for revealing archaeological remains associated with the various spaces that are believed to have been the domiciles of slaves at the President's House thus appears slim, in retrospect it is, nevertheless, unfortunate that no attempt was made to explore that possibility as part of the work leading up to the construction of the Liberty Bell Center. Most of the President's House site was not directly impacted by the new structure built to house the Liberty Bell, and archaeological investigations outside the construction zone were not legally required. However, electing not to carry out work at that time means that the opportunity to conduct a comprehensive archaeological investigation of the entire site has been foreclosed for the foreseeable future. Given the contentious nature of interpreting the President's House, and especially the conflict focusing on the question of whether, or how much of, the story of the enslaved residents of President Washington's household will be told once the development of the site has been completed, conducting a full archaeological excavation could at least have helped to reassure critics that the National Park Service was committed to a full and systematic investigation of all of the relevant evidence.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> My source for the construction history at the site of the President's House, and for the results of the 2000 archaeological investigations, is Lawler, "President's House in Philadelphia."

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 89–91.

<sup>5</sup> For background on the conflicts between various groups pertaining to the interpretation and use of the President's House site, see "Overview of the Controversy About the President's House in Philadelphia," <http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/controversy/controversyoverview.htm>. For a recent appraisal of the issues involved, see Jill Ogle, "Creating Dissonance for the Visitor: The Heart of the Liberty Bell Controversy," *Public Historian* 26 (summer 2004): 49–57.

The lack of archaeological evidence is a limiting factor in the ability to interpret the layout of the site, but it is doubtful that archaeology could answer the extremely detailed questions that scholars and site administrators still have about the organization and use of the building compound. In particular, the question of exactly where certain individuals lived and worked would be extremely difficult to address from an archaeological perspective, even if the site were in pristine condition. Fortunately, comparative data compiled from other sites exists to help address the many interpretive issues at hand relating to the President's House. One obvious source of comparison is the evidence that has been generated over the last twenty years pertaining to the circumstances of the slaves living at Mount Vernon, George Washington's home before and directly following his years living in Philadelphia. Given that Mount Vernon was a rural plantation with a much larger community of slaves who performed a variety of roles beyond the mansion, the similarities to the President's House are not as close as one would hope, but that information at least serves as a beginning point.

Mount Vernon was the plantation home of George Washington from 1754 until his death in 1799, and was an expansive estate that encompassed almost eight thousand acres of land divided into five interrelated farms. At the time of Washington's death, 316 enslaved workers lived on the plantation, with the house servants and most of the skilled craftsmen assigned to the central "Mansion House Farm," where the Washington family also made their home. Slaves living at the outlying farms were almost exclusively field hands and were under the daily supervision of resident overseers. In his will, Washington called for all of the slaves that he personally owned to be freed after his death, and this occurred on January 1, 1801. Most of the remaining slaves were bound to the estate of Daniel Parke Custis, the first husband of Washington's wife, Martha Custis Washington, and they were passed down to her heirs upon her death a year later.<sup>6</sup>

A variety of types of quarters were used at Mount Vernon to house the large, dispersed, and highly organized slave community, as seems generally to have been the case at Virginia's largest plantations. At Mount Vernon these ranged from a substantial brick building that held as many as sixty people in barracks-style conditions to small wooden cabins that might

<sup>6</sup> For more on Washington's changing attitudes toward slavery, and his evolving plans to free his slaves, see Jean B. Lee, "Mount Vernon Plantation: A Model for the Republic," in *Slavery at the Home of George Washington*, ed. Schwarz, 13–45.

shelter up to a dozen family members. The brick quarter was located at the Mansion House Farm, where the resident slaves performed duties as house servants to the Washingtons and as craftspeople in support of the entire plantation. The various outbuildings there also served as domiciles, and visitors' accounts indicate that cabins also supplemented the shelter provided by the brick quarter. Housing at the four outlying farms where the field hands lived consisted exclusively of log buildings—cabins and somewhat larger structures referred to as "quarters." Finally, an extremely well-appointed, large, and expensive structure—the "Servants Hall"—was built in 1775 to provide temporary quarters for servants, black and white, that accompanied visitors to the plantation. This highly unusual structure seems best explained as a social statement made by Washington for the benefit of the masters of the individuals who occasionally resided there.<sup>7</sup>

A large frame building that up until 1793 served as the main slave quarter at the Mount Vernon home farm was located along the north lane of outbuildings, less than three hundred feet from the mansion. It is possible that this quarter was erected by George Washington's older half-brother, Lawrence, before his death in 1752, as there is no record of its construction during George's ownership. A painting attributed to the well-known artist Edward Savage probably shows the structure during the last year of its existence and depicts a substantial building, two stories in height, at least six bays in length, and with chimneys in each gable (fig. 1). It was demolished in the fall or winter of 1792–93, after new brick quarters had been completed adjoining the greenhouse, which also are shown in Savage's painting.<sup>8</sup>

The differences between Mount Vernon and the President's House in terms of the number of slaves in residence, as well as the nature and variety of their living conditions, is significant. At Mount Vernon, the slaves were segmented according to occupation, which also determined their place of residence, the character of their domiciles, the nature of their interactions with other slaves, and even their opportunities to live together with family members. All of these variables were significant factors in determining the range of their daily activities and, to a degree, the quality of their lives. At the President's House, the much smaller group of enslaved

<sup>7</sup> For a full discussion of the characteristics of the domestic spaces occupied by slaves at Mount Vernon, and a consideration of the implications of the relationship of those differences to status, see Dennis J. Pogue, "The Domestic Architecture of Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon," *Winterthur Portfolio* 37 (2003): 3–22.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 7–8.

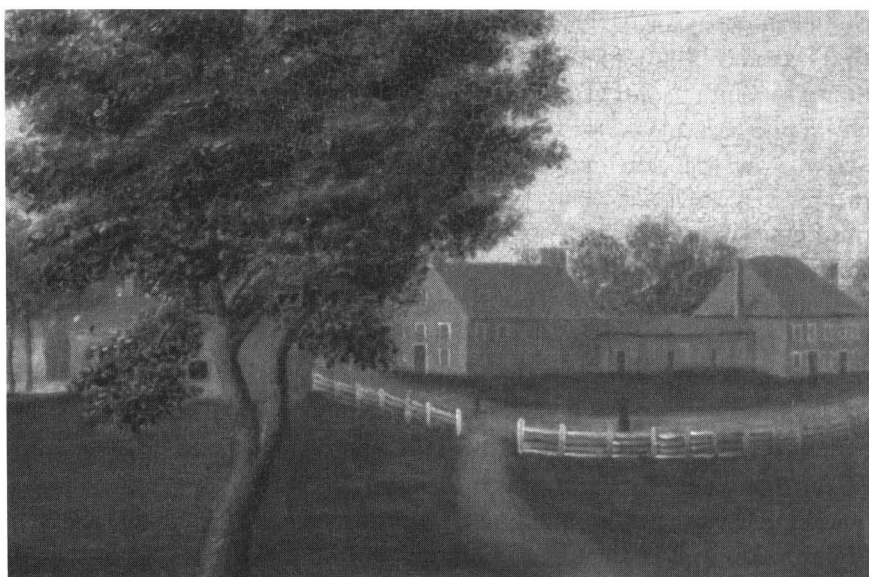


Fig. 1. The artist Edward Savage depicted the “House for Families” slave quarter (left) along with one of the one-story wings used to house slaves that was added to the greenhouse (right) in 1792. The House for Families was the main quarter for slaves who served as house servants and craftspeople at the Mansion House Farm from the 1760s until 1793. Courtesy of Historic Mount Vernon.

workers (never more than eight individuals) lived in a relatively circumscribed area—limited to the President’s House itself and the attached back-buildings—and served in jobs directly supporting the Washington household. This meant that the President’s House slaves probably were more closely supervised than any of the Mount Vernon slaves, with the possible exception of those who actually lived in the mansion and were the personal servants of the Washingtons. It is difficult to know, therefore, just how comparable much of the Mount Vernon information is in attempting to provide insights into the experience of the slaves living in Philadelphia. But evidence pertaining to the activities of the Mount Vernon slaves who served the Mount Vernon household, and in particular those individuals who served both at Mount Vernon and in Philadelphia, seems likely to be most illuminating.<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately, a rich assemblage of archaeological data has been generated that is associated with the Mount Vernon house servants, and this

<sup>9</sup> Lawler, “President’s House in Philadelphia,” 27.

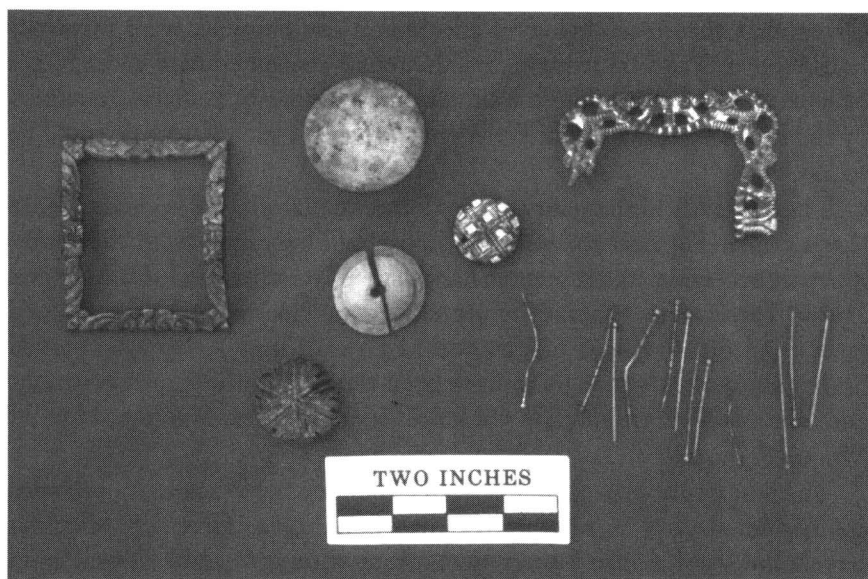


Fig. 2. A variety of household objects were recovered from a refuse-filled cellar that was located beneath the House for Families. The ornate shoe buckles and many metal buttons probably relate to the livery worn by slaves who acted as servants in the Washington household; the copper straight pins also could have been used on clothing. Courtesy of Historic Mount Vernon.

material is most likely to be helpful in this context. Archaeological investigations completed in 1989 revealed the remains of a brick-walled cellar, probably measuring approximately six feet on each side before it was intruded by later construction. Once the cellar ceased to be used for storage, it apparently became a handy receptacle for refuse, as archaeologists recovered a rich assemblage of domestic artifacts from the multiple layers of soil that filled the abandoned hole. The household items recovered include a wide variety of ceramics, table glass, table utensils, wine bottles, tools, and personal items such as tobacco pipes, buttons and buckles, and the like (fig. 2). The cellar was filled with refuse over a span of many years and was finally capped with structural debris when the building was demolished. Other than the presence of fragments of colonoware, a locally made earthenware that has been found throughout Virginia and the Carolinas in association with eighteenth-century slave sites, little in this assemblage provides even a hint that those who discarded the objects were African American slaves rather than a relatively prosperous planter family.

Given that the slaves living in the House for Families were primarily house servants and skilled workers, the refuse associated with them might be expected to exhibit patterns similar to the domestic remains generated by the slaves working at the President's House, if such a deposit could be found.<sup>10</sup>

The generally high quality of the domestic materials provides evidence that slaves living near the planter's household benefited from that proximity by receiving items second hand. The slaves living at the Mansion House Farm were generally more skilled and performed more valued tasks than did the field hands, and as a result may well have enjoyed higher status. Such appears to have been the case in the South generally, and abundant documentary evidence supports that interpretation at Mount Vernon.<sup>11</sup>

The best example of preferential treatment by the Washingtons toward an individual slave is their treatment of the cook, Hercules. Hercules served the Washington household both at Mount Vernon as well as in Philadelphia. According to the published recollections of George Washington Parke Custis, the step-grandson of George Washington, while in Philadelphia the Washingtons allowed Hercules to sell leftover foodstuffs, from which he realized a profit of up to two hundred dollars annually. With this income, he was able to purchase such items as fine clothes, a watch and cane, and ornate shoe buckles. Nevertheless, in 1797 Hercules ran away rather than return with the family to Mount Vernon as scheduled at the conclusion of Washington's second term as president.<sup>12</sup>

Other items recovered from the cellar reflect the occupations of many of the slaves who lived at the quarter, namely domestic servitude in the Washington household. In particular, the many buttons (thirty) and shoe buckles (eleven) suggest the type of apparel worn by the male slaves who served in the mansion. Of the thirty buttons, eighteen are in sizes typically associated with men's coats and waistcoats. The shoe buckles include two that have a relatively intricate molded decoration, one of which still retains portions of a decorative silver-colored wash. Other clothing items

<sup>10</sup> Pogue, "Slave Lifeways at Mount Vernon."

<sup>11</sup> John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, rev. ed. (New York, 1979), 250–51.

<sup>12</sup> George Washington Parke Custis, *Recollections and Private Memoirs of Washington*, ed. Benson J. Lossing (New York, 1860), 423; Fritz Hirschfeld, *George Washington and Slavery: A Documentary Portrayal* (Columbia, MO, 1997), 70–71.



include two shirt studs, at least one pair of cufflinks, five glass discs that might be cufflink inserts, and two copper alloy watch fobs. Whether or not any of these objects were purchased specifically for the use of the slaves is difficult to ascertain. Surviving records indicate that Washington ordered buttons specifically to outfit his house servants, however, and several of the white metal buttons recovered fit the description of some of the buttons purchased for that purpose. Finally, theft may explain the presence of some of the objects in the cellar, especially the small decorative items like the watch fobs and cufflinks.<sup>13</sup>

Patterns found within the ceramic assemblage support the inference that the tablewares at least were passed down from the Washingtons to the slaves when those items had fallen out of fashion. The most common ceramic type recovered is English white salt-glazed stoneware, popular both in England and America from the 1720s until the late 1760s. The earliest documented occasion of George Washington's ordering stoneware for use at Mount Vernon dates to 1757. Its popularity declined rapidly with the introduction in 1762 of a new type of tableware, Josiah Wedgwood's creamware. George Washington's desire to keep current with the newest fashion trends led him, in July 1769, to become one of the first men in America to order a full setting (250 pieces) of the new ceramic. The shipment reached Virginia a year later and creamware appears to have quickly replaced white salt-glazed stoneware on the Washingtons' table. The overwhelming proportion of sherds of white salt-glazed stoneware in relation to creamware (28 percent compared to 8 percent) suggests that the Washingtons passed the stoneware down to the quarter as a set when the more fashionable creamware became available.<sup>14</sup>

The detailed study of ceramics and food remains has been a particularly rewarding mode of analysis, both at Mount Vernon and at sites throughout the South. Several pioneering studies in the 1970s first identified patterns in the types of ceramic vessels used by slaves, and in the diversity and the quality of slave diet, as indicative of the relatively impoverished economic condition and the dependent status inherent in slavery. Over the intervening years, considerable additional evidence has been found to indicate that slaves used a relatively higher proportion of bowls than planter households, from which they apparently ate one-pot meals. The presence of finely chopped animal bones, which also reflected generally

<sup>13</sup> Pogue, "Slave Lifeways at Mount Vernon," 115–16.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 116–17.

poor cuts of meat, provides other evidence for the prevalence of such meals. Research has also revealed that, in general, the diet of slaves was much more diverse than the putative reliance on rations of pork and cornmeal supplemented by vegetables grown in personal gardens. A total of fifty-eight different animal species are represented in the collection of more than twenty-five thousand faunal elements recovered from the cellar at Mount Vernon. The relatively high proportion of wild species (28.3 percent) present indicates that Washington's slaves were able to augment their rations of fish, cornmeal, beef, and pork, not only by raising chickens, but also by hunting wild game and by fishing.<sup>15</sup>

The combined archaeological and documentary data, both from Mount Vernon specifically and from the surrounding region, provide strong support for the interpretation that certain privileged slaves enjoyed elevated levels of autonomy. That house servants in particular benefited from their association with the planter family by receiving special treatment in the form of better clothing, by receiving castoffs from the mansion for their use, and by earning gratuities for extraordinary service is particularly well documented. Evidence such as the apparently greater diversity in food remains associated with slaves living in the House for Families quarter is more equivocal in its meaning. The presence of wild species suggests that the Mount Vernon slaves were free to hunt and forage for food in addition to their rations, but whether this was a real benefit or simply reflected a perceived inadequacy in the food provided by the master is difficult to determine. At any rate, plantation records and other accounts clearly indicate that many of the Mount Vernon slaves, not just the house servants, were at liberty to travel between the farms to visit family members and even to visit other plantations during days when they were excused from labor.<sup>16</sup>

In an urban environment like Philadelphia it would seem likely that the slaves working at the President's House would have even greater opportunities to interact with both fellow slaves and freedmen during the course of their duties. Once again, the president's cook, Hercules, is the best example of a slave who seems to have been allowed considerable liberty in his movements. Hercules was known to leave the house after

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 117–19.

<sup>16</sup> For other examples of special treatment of Mount Vernon slaves, and evidence that slaves often traveled great distances to visit relatives and to carry out personal business, see Hirschfeld, *George Washington and Slavery*, 30.

completing his cooking chores, where he would join "his brother-loungers of the *pave*" and "proceeded up Market street, attracting considerable attention." Given that Hercules seems to have occupied a particularly lofty place within the hierarchy of the Washington household, it is unlikely that his fellow bondsmen enjoyed quite the same liberties. But in the absence of more complete documentary or archaeological data relating to the presidential household, additional insights into the question of the level of autonomy enjoyed by the slaves will be difficult to obtain.<sup>17</sup>

Given the high status that house servants at Mount Vernon enjoyed, and the limited documentary evidence that suggests a similar situation at the President's House, it is likely that all of the slaves living with the Washingtons in Philadelphia enjoyed a number of privileges that would not have been made available to their fellows living at the outlying farms back at Mount Vernon. Clearly, Hercules was noteworthy in this respect, and it would be a mistake to assume that all of the President's House slaves enjoyed such a high level of autonomy as well as creature comforts. Unfortunately, given the paucity of evidence, both archaeological and documentary in nature, it is unlikely that it will ever be possible to provide significantly more insight into the question of the quality of life for all of the President's House slaves.

*Historic Mount Vernon*

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<sup>17</sup> Custis, *Recollections*, 423–24.

