

A Real National Treasure: Mount Vernon

by Erik Johnson, PassPorter Guest Contributor

We recently took a day trip to Mount Vernon, Virginia, to explore George Washington's famous plantation overlooking the Potomac River. This area is worthy of a full day excursion because of all the interesting things to see regarding the Father of our Country. We chose to take the "National Treasure" tour, which features locations used in the Disney film, "National Treasure 2 - Book of Secrets."

The day of our trip dawned a partly cloudy but nice 52 degrees. We enjoyed a scenic drive along the George Washington Parkway, parked very close to the entrance, and were able to get inside before a very large youth group. The visitor's experience is run very smoothly - you get oriented quickly and are provided just the right amount of information so as to avoid excessive questions. We purchased our admission tickets which included the limited-time "National Treasure" tour and the add-on for the newly re-constructed distillery and older grist mill (which is located about three miles away). (Ticket prices are available on their web site.) Because we had arrived later than planned, we decided to skip the 20 minute orientation film and proceeded to the area in front of the mansion itself, where the special tours begin. As we had a little bit of time before the tour, we examined some of the out-buildings (re-constructed, of course) on the way, while dodging the allure of the gift shops. Clearly the Mount Vernon Ladies Association (MVLA), which owns Mount Vernon, has been taking lessons from Disney...

In Washington's time, many people worked to support the plantation, and that is very much in evidence here. One concept that has finally been embraced is to acknowledge the fact that Washington was a slave owner, instead of glossing over the issue as was done previously. This makes him seem much more like a real person and less like a marble statue on a pedestal to marvel at. I think that makes him more of a role model and less of a legend.

We walked around the north side of the Upper Garden and we met our trench-coated guide, John Marshall (formerly of Pittsburgh), who now works at MVLA's Customer Relations. John told us that there really is a tunnel, a cornerstone and a vaulted room in the basement, just like in the movie! He then took us around to the river side of the mansion for a better view of the property. You can really tell that it is on a mount in comparison to most of the surrounding countryside. He explained to us

that even though Mount Vernon is only in the film for five minutes, it took three weeks for the crew of hundreds to record what was needed for the film. Apparently, it was very chilly during the shoot and the extras had to constantly be reminded to remove their coats. The exteriors were filmed at night, with a lot of lighting equipment, prompting many calls to the authorities about suspicious activities ranging from space aliens to illegal activities.

After obtaining the key, John led us down into the cellar. We could see the rough-hewn beams and supports along with some curious copper flashing that we figured out was there to prevent termite infestation (I wish we had some of that copper in our own old house). He then pointed out the vaulted room that was re-created back in Hollywood, as well as the cornerstone that actually has George Washington's elder half-brother Lawrence's initials on it (LW instead of GW as in the film). Lawrence owned the estate until he died in 1754, when ownership passed to George. The MVLA had to install air conditioning in the mansion, because even though the doors remain open much of the time, the heat and moisture from the hundreds of thousands of yearly visitors would take an increasing toll on the structure and furnishings. The structure of the cellar would also suffer if they offered tours year-round or if a film crew worked here for weeks, so it was re-created on a sound stage.

After leading us out of the cellar and locking the door, John led us to the edge of the lawn and showed us where the spring house and the riverside opening to the tunnel is located. The tunnel connects the mansion and the riverside to make it easier to haul ice from the river to the ice house. So, there really is a tunnel at Mount Vernon, but its purpose is not mysterious at all, but very practical for a very busy 18th century plantation that produced food for profit and to sustain the plantation's residents. We then made our way down to the river's edge and saw the garage that was built into the hill to house the chemical fire truck that Henry Ford donated in 1923. Ford was concerned that the mansion could burn down before other fire equipment could arrive. We learned that even though the mansion looks like stone, it is actually made of textured wood. John had to end our tour there at the river's edge, but our experience today has shown us that Hollywood can do a very good job of making something mundane into something mysterious!

Today's Mount Vernon is well preserved and has many recently reconstructed buildings, like the 16-sided threshing barn. This building was designed by Washington to make the threshing of grain more efficient. A surplus of grain allowed him to make money from the production of flour and whiskey (more about that later). Before we left

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Mount Vernon, we went to the food court for lunch. The selections were similar to what you would find at a mall. We then went back over to the Ford Orientation Center and watched a very interesting orientation film, introduced by Pat Sajak.

Then we went back to the mansion and were pleased to find that even though the queue was much longer than it had been earlier in the day, it moved quickly. One rule that is strictly enforced is no photographs inside the mansion. (The gift shops have books with very good photos.) The mansion is very well furnished, in a style similar to homes in Williamsburg and Philadelphia's Liberty Hall. After a brief stop in the museum and gift shop, we packed up and drove over to the gristmill and distillery.

In order to produce the flour and whiskey, Mount Vernon had a grist mill, a distillery, and a barley malting operation located at Dogue Creek, three miles from the mansion, where there was better terrain for the water-powered operation. This site is also operated by the MVLA and the distillery was recently brought back into working condition. It even turned out a small batch of whiskey in 2007. Samples were not available during our visit, but they will be making commemorative products soon. The distiller told us that it was not aged, and therefore we would probably not enjoy the taste of it. The gristmill is very interesting and can grind both wheat and corn because it has two sets of millstones. It is ingeniously designed, with mostly wood parts that can be replaced. Mount Vernon is a wonderful place to visit on a spring day. I hope everyone gets a chance to enjoy this "National Treasure."

About The Author: Erik Johnson grew up in the Washington, D.C. area and works in the city, but still loves to explore the area's many interesting sites. He lives in the country with his wife Kendra and their sons and dogs and cats.

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