The Domestic Architecture of Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon

Dennis J. Pogue

Mount Vernon, the eighteenth-century plantation of George Washington, was home to a large, dispersed, and highly organized community of enslaved workers. Information available in the form of documentary evidence, archaeological data, and extant structures is sufficient to reconstruct the system of slave housing in use there. The resulting case study not only documents the various types of buildings used to house the slaves at the plantation of one of Virginia's wealthiest and most powerful citizens but also provides insight into the factors that influenced Washington and his fellow planters in making their decisions regarding the nature of the domestic accommodations afforded their slaves.

THE GENERIC image of southern slave quarters that has emerged from their repeated depictions in American popular culture is of small cabins aligned in rickety rows along the margins of plantation society. The problem with this vision is not that it is necessarily inaccurate as much as it is biased toward conditions that existed on only a small percentage of plantations of the type most often found in the Deep South during the period comprising the decades leading up to the outbreak of the Civil War. Not surprising, ongoing scholarly research indicates that the nature of the housing for slaves to be found throughout the American South over the preceding two hundred years was considerably more diverse. Single-family cabins were only one possibility among a variety of quartering schemes that were available, and large plantations often incorporated a mixture of options. The selection of one system over another, or the decision to combine different types of housing, undoubtedly was driven by a number of factors. 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.[1]

Enough information is available, in the form of extant structures, documentary evidence, and archaeological data, to make it possible to reconstruct the characteristics of the slave housing system that was adopted at George Washington's

Dennis J. Pogue is the Associate Director for Preservation for Mount Vernon and was the chief archaeologist there for seven years.

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[1] While it may be the case that for most people no image whatever comes to mind when the topic of slave quarters arises, over the last half-century the depictions of southern plantations appearing in popular literature, films, and television have overwhelmingly portrayed a homogenized version of the type of slave housing imagined to exist at places such as Scarlet O'Hara's ''Tara,'' Ashley Wilkes's ''Twelve Oaks,'' and at other antebellum plantations of the Deep South. This situation is discussed by Edward Chappell and Vanessa E. Patrick in ''Architecture, Archaeology, and Slavery in the Early Chesapeake,'' a paper presented at the Society for Historical Archaeology Annual Conference in Richmond, Va., in 1991 and is alluded to by Philip D. Morgan in *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), pp. 103–5.

Mount Vernon plantation. The result is a detailed case study of the domestic architecture of slavery at the plantation of one of Virginia's most affluent and powerful citizens that offers insight into the factors that fostered that diversity.

This evidence has informed an expanded program of interpretation that is currently under way at the museum that encompasses Washington's preserved home. The program focuses on the lives of the Mount Vernon slaves and will include the eventual construction of a slave cabin. The cabin, along with a surrounding four-acre, recreated farm complex, will serve as the locus for interpreting the daily activities of slaves living on one of the Mount Vernon outlying farms. The interpretation of the new cabin will complement existing interpretive efforts that feature a reconstructed brick slave quarter that was located near Washington's dwelling at what was called the Mansion House Farm.

In itself a remarkably rich body of evidence pertaining to this particular plantation, the information on the housing types provided for the enslaved workers at Mount Vernon also illustrates the range of domestic accommodations that was present at the plantation homes of other members of the wealthiest stratum of the Chesapeake gentry. Although conditions at Mount Vernon cannot be viewed as representative of situations at the more humble plantations that were the regional norm, the specific types of slave houses there, especially the log quarters and cabins that housed the field hands at the outlying farms, were used throughout Virginia and the South.[2]

Washington was a particularly energetic manager who sought to reinvent Mount Vernon as a model of progressive agriculture, and these characteristics further set him apart from the majority of his peers. Partly as a consequence of his limited success in his efforts to improve the plantation operations, and because of his growing frustration in his attempts to enlist unmotivated slave laborers to achieve that vision, Washington developed strong opinions regarding the proper management of his workers. Over time the types of houses in which his slaves were quartered, as well as their placement on the landscape in relationship to domestic spaces occupied by overseers and by Washington himself, came to acquire greater significance in the overall management plan of the estate. As a consequence, Washington employed a variety of structural types that together constitute a hierarchy of architectural forms, each of which was intended to achieve an array of specific objectives.[3]

In his last years, Washington sought a private avenue to enable him to act on his growing antipathy to the institution of slavery, even though he chose not to support the initiatives of abolitionists during his terms as president. This effort was made more complex by the fact that he was not at liberty to free all of the Mount Vernon slaves. Washington owned only 123 of the 316 slaves living on his plantation in 1799, and so any manumission plan that he devised would leave the majority of the slave community in bondage. Seeking to avoid the ''painful sensations'' that he knew would result from the disruption of families formed by members of the two groups, Washington called for his slaves to be freed after his death. Washington's evolving attitudes toward his slaves are reflected in many of the decisions he made regarding the types of housing that were established at Mount Vernon, and therefore that process provides additional insight into the factors that influenced his final solution.[4]

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 shelter only a half-dozen occupants. The brick quarter was located at the Mansion House Farm—the home farm where the Washington family lived and where the resident slaves performed duties as house servants 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

[2] See Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint,* pp. 104–24, for the most recent comprehensive survey of the range of slave housing found in eighteenth-century Virginia. See also Dell Upton, ''White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia,'' in Robert Blair St. George, ed., *Material Life in America, 1600–1860* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), pp. 357–69.

[3] On Washington's vision for the new nation and an assessment of the impact his attempted innovations had on the lives of the Mount Vernon slaves, see Jean B. Lee, ''Mount Vernon Plantation: A Model for the Republic,'' in Philip J. Schwarz, ed., *Slavery at the Home of George Washington* (Mount Vernon, Va.: Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, 2001), pp. 13–45.

[4] For a recent assessment of Washington's evolving attitudes toward slavery, see Dorothy Twohig, '' 'That Species of Property': Washington's Role in the Controversy over Slavery,'' in Don Higginbotham, ed., *George Washington Reconsidered* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), pp. 114–38.

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, 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 for the benefit of the masters of the individuals who occasionally resided there.

Washington effectively inherited the two-thousand-acre Mount Vernon plantation in 1754, following the death of his elder half-brother, Lawrence Washington, two years earlier. This circumstance was a life-changing event for the twenty-two-year-old Washington, as it provided him with the landed estate needed to enter the upper echelon of Virginia society. Young George Washington had embarked upon a career as a surveyor, using connections with the prominent Fairfax family to gain training in the profession and then to secure a position as official surveyor for Culpeper County. Washington soon abandoned the relatively remunerative but only moderately prestigious career of surveyor, but the life of a planter still was not his first choice. Washington was quite taken with the idea of a military career, and he spent several years in positions of command with the Virginia Regiment, as well as in other military capacities, in the colony's role of supporting the English campaigns against the French and Indians. But with no apparent possibility of advancement as a regular officer in the King's service, Washington decided by 1757 to devote his considerable energies to the life of a tobacco planter.[5]

The estate of Lawrence Washington included sixty-two slaves, with approximately forty listed as living at Mount Vernon. Unfortunately, the inventory of Lawrence's holdings includes only four outbuildings—a kitchen, a washhouse, a storehouse, and a dairy—which were situated very near the dwelling. Therefore, it is not known how many slave quarters were present at that time or where they may have been located. As early as 1760, however, only six years after George acquired the property and little more than a year since his return from the French and Indian War, tax records indicate that at least twenty slaves were distributed among four outlying areas in addition to the ''Home Plantation.'' Presumably, those slaves were lodged in quarters at the respective farms and the mill—possibly a holdover from a similar system instituted by Lawrence during his tenure at Mount Vernon.[6]

George's slave holdings grew steadily from the 27 individuals he had acquired by 1754 via inheritance and lease from the estate of his brother Lawrence (the remainder of Lawrence's slaves passed to other family members). By 1763 Washington paid taxes on 64 individuals (those over the age of twelve); by 1770 he was taxed on 87 slaves; and by 1786 there were 216 slaves at Mount Vernon, 121 of whom were older than 12 years. Finally, in the year of his death, George inventoried his slave population for the last time, listing a total of 316 slaves, 201 of whom were considered fit to work. After 1772 the precipitous growth of the Mount Vernon slave population was almost solely due to natural increase, as Washington all but ceased purchasing slaves after that year (fig. 1).[7]

The decision to stop buying slaves was the result of many factors, but economics were apparently the overriding consideration. Because of the weakening of the international tobacco market and his frustrating inability to produce a crop that would command high prices in England, Washington found himself steadily slipping deeper into debt. By 1766 Washington had elected to discontinue cultivating tobacco on his Potomac River lands and switched to mixed grain production while diversifying into other commercial areas including fishing, milling, and, by 1797, distilling. These efforts, combined with constant

[5] William M. S. Rasmussen and Robert S. Tilton, *George Washington: The Man Behind the Myths* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), pp. 29–99; Dorothy Twohig, ''The Making of George Washington,'' in Warren R. Hofstra, ed., *George Washington and the Virginia Backcountry* (Madison, Wis.: Madison House, 1998), pp. 3–34; Philander D. Chase, ''A Stake in the West: George Washington as Backcountry Surveyor and Landholder,'' in Hofstra, *George Washington and the Virginia Backcountry,* pp. 159–94.

[6] W. W. Abbot, ed., *The Papers of George Washington, Colonial Series,* 10 vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983–95), 1:227–34; Ellen M. Clark, ''The Division of Slaves,'' *Mount Vernon Ladies' Association Annual Report* (1984): 23–25; ''An Inventory of the Estate of Lawrence Washington, March 8, 1753,'' manuscript, Mount Vernon Library; Abbot, *Papers, Colonial Series,* 6:428.

[7] Abbot, *Papers, Colonial Series,* 1:227–34, 6:428, 7:227–28, 8: 356–57. Donald Jackson, ed., *The Diaries of George Washington,* 6 vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976–79), 4: 277–84; John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington,* 39 vols. (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1931–44), 37:256–68; Fritz Hirschfeld, *George Washington and Slavery: A Documentary Portrayal* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), pp. 11–20.

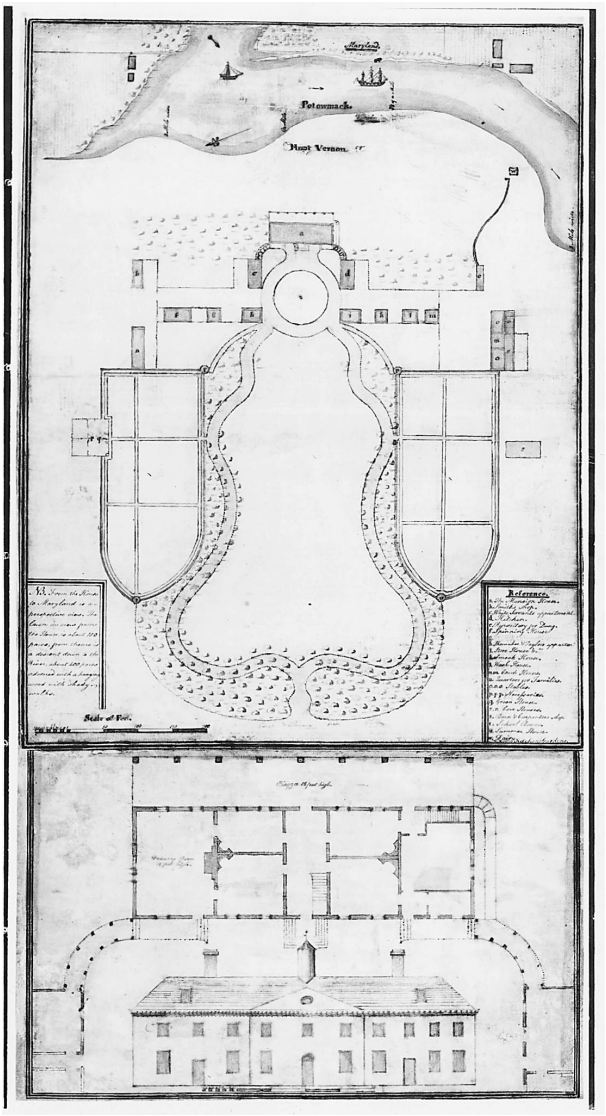

Fig. 1. The Vaughan Plan of Mount Vernon (1787). (Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.) The Mansion is at the center top; the ''House for Families'' slave quarter is the longest vertical rectangle at the left; and the Greenhouse is the square at the far left; the new slave quarters were not added to the Greenhouse until 1792.

attention to the bottom line in all of his ventures, allowed Washington to repay his debt and place Mount Vernon on a more solid financial footing.[8]

The change from labor intensive tobacco cultivation to grain farming, which was much more conducive to using animal power and other labor-saving measures, meant that Washington no longer required such a large labor force. The continuous drain on plantation resources caused by the excess population was an obvious concern. Yet Washington was unwilling to extricate himself from the predicament by selling off the unneeded laborers. In a letter written in the last year of his life, Washington summed up his precarious position: ''It is demonstratively clear, that on this Estate I have more working Negros by a full moiety, than can be employed to any advantage in the farming system. . . . To sell the overplus I cannot, because I am principled against this kind of traffic in the human species. To hire them out, is almost as bad, because they could not be disposed of in families to any advantage, and to disperse the families I have an aversion. What then is to be done? Something must or I shall be ruined.''[9]

Always an energetic and innovative manager, in the years following his return from the Revolutionary War in 1783 Washington embarked on a remarkable range of new initiatives, all aimed at making his estate more efficient. But in addition to the personal financial benefits he sought from reorganizing the plantation and in undertaking new methods of crop production, processing, and distribution, Washington hoped for a larger reward. He was committed to this program of experimentation and innovation because he was convinced that the future of the new nation depended on its success in farming. In a letter he wrote to a friend in 1788, he argued that ''every improvement in husbandry should be gratefully received and peculiarly fostered in this Country, not only as promoting the interest and lessening the labor of the farmer, but as advancing our respectability in a national point of view.''[10]

One area in which Washington particularly wanted to improve his operation was in the management of the Mount Vernon slaves—his greatest, if also his most troublesome, resource. This agenda had a significant impact on the nature of the housing made available to the Mount Vernon slaves. Washington certainly was not unique in his desire to maximize the productive labor that could be garnered from his slaves, but he was unusual in terms of the systematic nature of his planning and his diligence in closely supervising his plantation managers and overseers. He was also

[8] Dennis J. Pogue, ''Mount Vernon: Transformation of an Eighteenth-Century Plantation System,'' in Paul A. Shackel and Barbara J. Little, eds., *Historical Archaeology of the Chesapeake* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), pp. 101–14; Bruce Ragsdale, ''George Washington, the British Tobacco Trade, and Economic Opportunity in Prerevolutionary Virginia,'' *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 97, no. 2 (1989): 133–62.

[9] Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 37:338–39.

[10] Lee, ''Mount Vernon Plantation,'' pp. 20–21; Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 29:455.

Fig. 2. Edward Savage, *East Front of Mount Vernon,* 1792. Oil on canvas; H. 22″; W. 35½″. (Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.) The Greenhouse is at the far right, with one of the new one-story slave quarter wings directly to its left; the old ''House for Families'' slave quarter is just to the left of the wing.

scrupulous in his desire to balance fair treatment of the slaves with the goal of maximum production. A plan for the work to be carried out in the year 1789, which Washington drafted and sent to his estate manager, is typical in expressing these twin expectations: ''To request that my people may be at their work as soon as it is light, work till it is dark, and be diligent while they are at it, can hardly be necessary; because the propriety of it must strike every Manager who attends to my interest . . . the presumption being that every labourer (male or female) does as much in the 24 hours as their strength without endangering the health, or constitution, will allow of.''[11]

A large frame building that up until 1793 appears to have served as the main slave quarter at the Mount Vernon home farm was located along the north lane of outbuildings, directly across from the blacksmiths' shop. It is possible that this quarter was erected by Lawrence, as there is no record of its construction during George's ownership. A painting, attributed to Edward Savage, probably shows the structure during the last year of its existence, circa 1792 (fig. 2). It is depicted as a substantial building, two stories in height, at least six bays in length, and with chimneys in each gable. 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 depiction.[12]

Virtually no other evidence pertaining to the earlier building—referred to as the ''Quarters for Families'' on the Vaughan plan of 1787, as the ''House for Families'' in a letter, but most commonly just as the ''Old Quarter''—is available. That it was a frame building is indicated by a reference to reusing the ''old plank ripped off the old Quarter'' for weather board on a ''Necessary'' being built to accommodate the inhabitants of the ''New Quarter.''[13]

Archaeological investigations in 1989 revealed the remains of a brick-walled cellar, probably approximately 6 feet on each side before it was in-

[11] Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 30:175–76.

[12] The earliest known reference to this structure may be George Washington's note in 1761, that ''lightning struck My Quarter and near 10 Negroes in it'' (Jackson, *Diaries of George Washington,* 1:281; Washington directed his plantation manager, Anthony Whiting, to remove the old quarter in a letter dated October 14, 1792; cited in Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 32:182.

[13] Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 31:307–8.

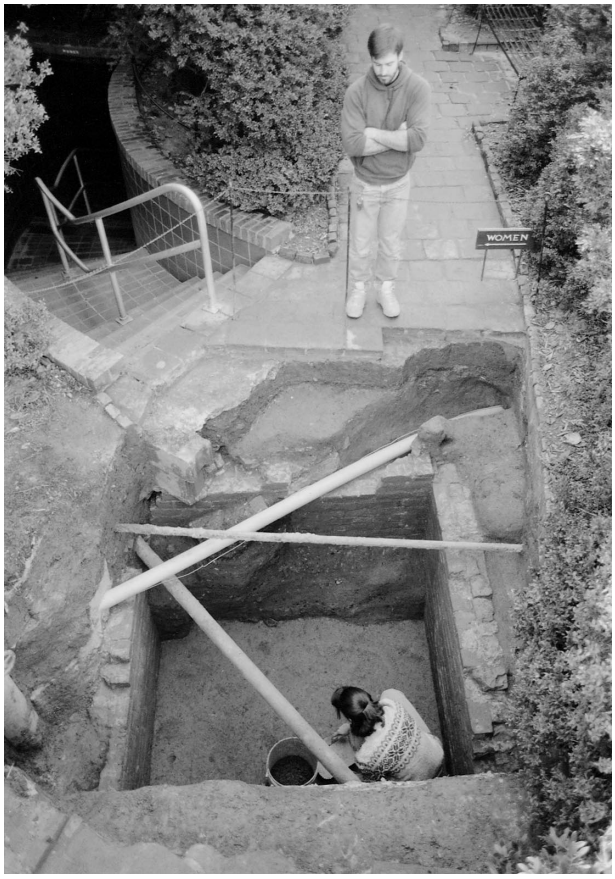

Fig. 3. Overall view of the cellar located beneath the ''House for Families'' slave quarter during excavation at Mount Vernon, 1989. (Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.)

truded by later construction, located within the footprint of this building (fig. 3). The cellar is oriented square with the quarter as it is depicted in the Savage view. Measuring from the far wall of the cellar to the east gable wall of the reconstructed new quarter indicates that the old quarter was at least 55 feet in length. Once again, by measuring from a line extending from the corner of the new quarter to a point that incorporates the cellar within the building, the width would be at least 35 feet. At 1,925 square feet per floor, the building would have had almost 4,000 gross square feet of space.[14]

The 1786 census of the Mount Vernon slaves lists sixty-seven individuals at the Mansion House Farm. Not all of those people seem to have been housed in this quarter, however, as several accounts indicate that other quarters were located nearby. In 1795 one visitor to the plantation noted that ''the cabins for the slaves'' were arranged in a group, apparently situated north of the Mansion House in the general vicinity of the new quarter. In 1799 a second visitor remarked on the existence of ''negro huts,'' which seem to be the same structures observed earlier. At least some slaves also were lodged in the other outbuildings. In 1793 Washington referred to ''the Cook, and the Mulatto fellow Frank in the house, her husband; both of whom live in the Kitchen.''[15]

The new quarter consisted of one-story wings attached to either side of the Greenhouse. That building burned in 1835 and was reconstructed in 1950–51 based on a combination of archaeological data, documentary evidence, and graphic depictions (fig. 4). Particularly useful in this effort were the Savage painting, several renderings of the facade from the early nineteenth century made for the purpose of acquiring fire insurance (fig. 5), and two alternate schemes of the building floor plan drafted by George Washington (fig. 6). Both floor plans called for multiple large rooms. The painting by Savage shows single doors centered on three bays. The discovery of wall footings and the bases of the chimneys during excavations at the time of the reconstruction indicate that ''Plan No. 2'' was the one selected, with two large rooms in each wing.[16]

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[14] Dennis J. Pogue, ''The Archaeology of Plantation Life: Another Perspective on George Washington's Mount Vernon,'' *Virginia Cavalcade* 41, no. 2 (Autumn 1991): 74–83; Dennis J. Pogue and Esther C. White, ''Summary Report on the 'House for Families' Slave Quarter Site (44Fx762/40–47), Mount Vernon Plantation, Mount Vernon, Virginia,'' *Archeological Society of Virginia Quarterly Bulletin* 25, no. 2 (December 1991): 11–27. The presence of small ''root'' cellars located within the footprints of Virginia slave quarters, spaces that apparently were used to store personal belongings, has been documented at a number of archaeological sites; see Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint,* p. 116. The cellar found at the House for Families is larger than most and seems more likely to have served in a general storage function. No evidence to indicate that cellars were situated within the footprint of the Greenhouse quarters was found during the excavations carried out there in 1950; see Walter M. Macomber, ''Greenhouse-Quarters Reconstruction,'' *Mount Vernon Ladies' Association Annual Report* (1951): 35–40; Walter M. Macomber, ''The Rebuilding of the Greenhouse-Quarters,'' *Mount Vernon Ladies' Association Annual Report* (1952): 19–26.

[15] Jackson, *Diaries of George Washington,* 4:277–83; Isaac Weld, *Travels through the States of North America, and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, during the years 1795, 1796, and 1797,* 2d ed. (London: J. Stockdale, 1799), p. 92; Joshua Brooks, ''A Dinner at Mount Vernon—1799,'' *New York Historical Society Quarterly* (April 1947): 22; I am indebted to Mary V. Thompson, Mount Vernon research specialist, and her unpublished paper, '' 'A Mean Pallet': Housing of the Mount Vernon Slaves,'' for bringing these and other references to my attention. Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 33:142–43.

[16] Macomber, ''Greenhouse-Quarters Reconstruction,'' pp. 35–40, Macomber, ''Rebuilding of the Greenhouse-Quarters,'' pp. 19–26.

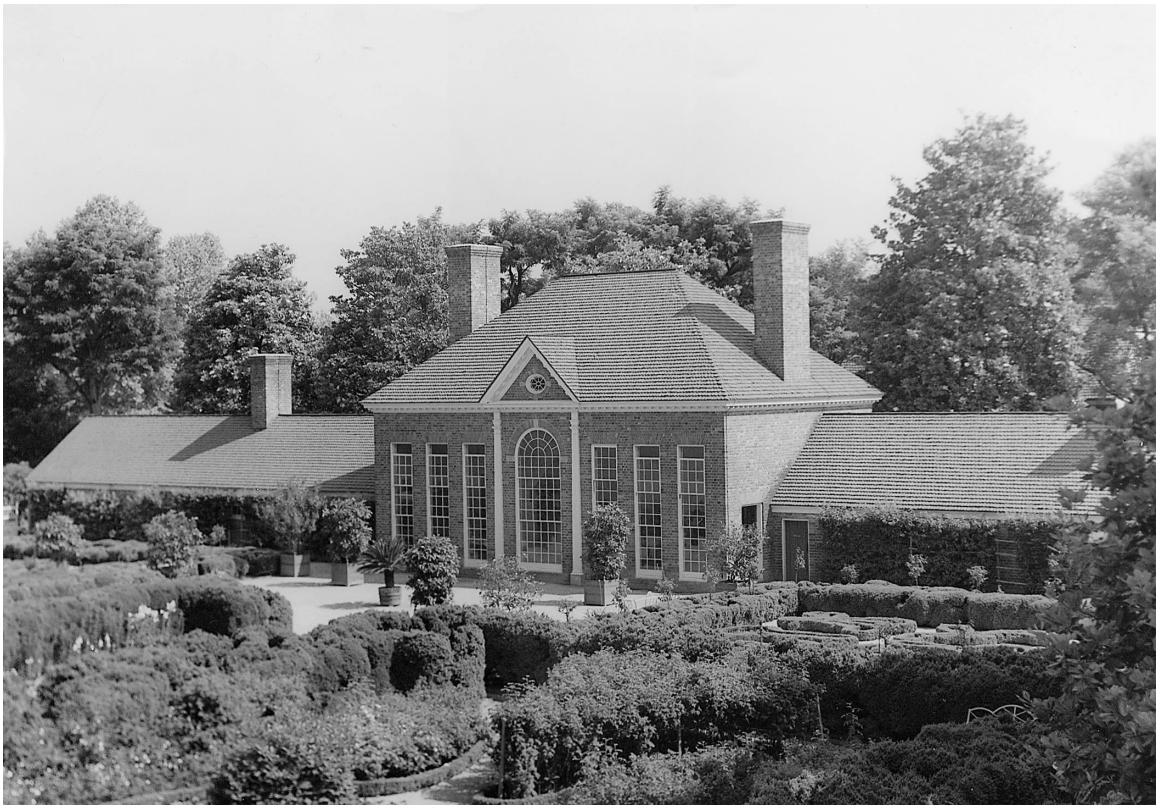

Fig. 4. The reconstructed Greenhouse and slave quarter wings, from the south. (Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.)

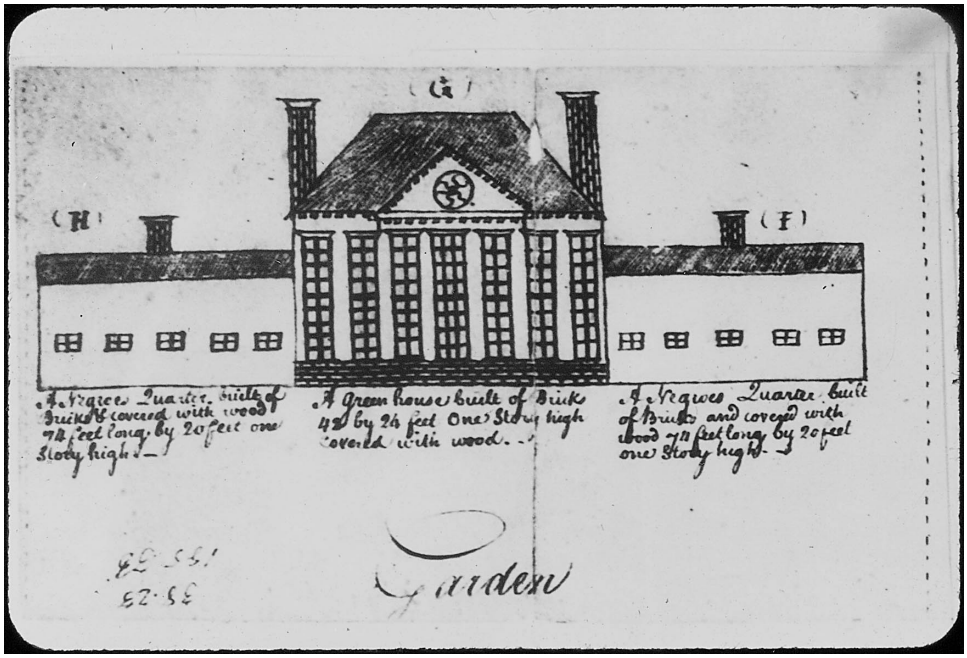

Fig. 5. The south facade of the Greenhouse and the adjoining slave quarter wings, from the Mutual Assurance Society of Richmond policy on Mount Vernon, 1803. (Virginia State Library and Archives.)

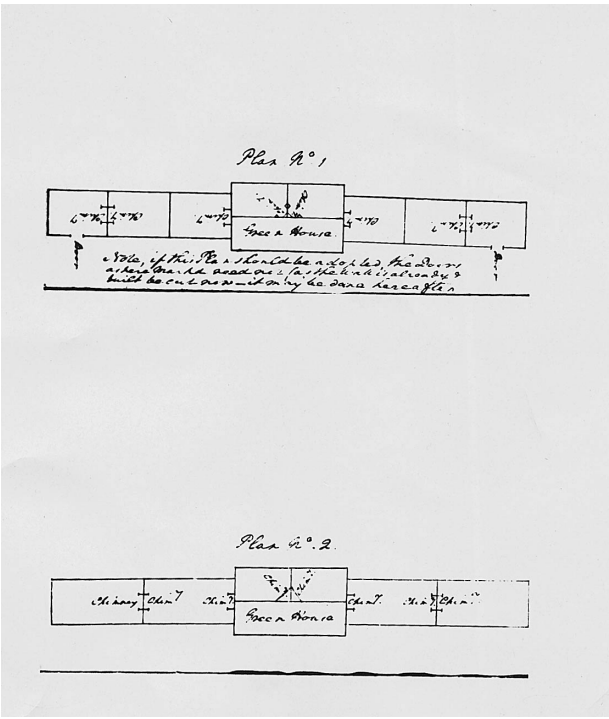

Fig. 6. George Washington, alternate plans for the layout of the Greenhouse slave quarters, between 1787 and 1792. (Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.) Plan No. 2 (bottom) was the one adopted.

Washington had apparently contemplated constructing a new quarter in the same general location almost twenty years earlier. Presumably, at least initially, the uncertainty of the war years caused the project to be postponed. The plan to build the new quarter is recorded in a letter to George Washington from his plantation manager, Lund Washington, in November 1775: ''I suppose there is a wall to be Built in the new Garden next the Quarter. I think I have heard you say you designd to have a House Built the whole length for Negroes perhaps you may direct that to be first done if so be particular in the Wall, that there may be no difficulty in joining other walls to it so as to make out the House Divisions, etc.'' Given only the vague reference to the ''House Divisions,'' it is not possible even to speculate about how similar the layout of this proposed building might have been when compared to the one finally constructed in 1792/93.[17]

There is little in the way of surviving documentary evidence to help in interpreting the layout and use of the interior spaces in the new quarter. Moreover, what evidence there is beyond Washington's floor plan is extremely ambiguous. In April 1792, work on the interior apparently was at an advanced stage, with several references to workmen preparing materials and installing ''births.'' When the building was reconstructed in the 1950s, the term *births* was interpreted to mean bunks, and wooden beds set on brick footings were installed. There is virtually no documentary evidence indicating the presence of permanent beds, such as these appear to have been, at quarters on other plantations. One notable exception is an order given by Robert ''King'' Carter to include built-in beds ''a foot and a half from the ground,'' in a number of ''very good'' slave cabins he was planning to build. As beds used by slaves seem to have run the gamut from the built-ins mentioned by Carter to cow hides or loose straw pallets placed directly on the floor, additional bedding to supplement the ''births'' was likely necessary to accommodate the large number of slaves housed there.[18]

Once again, the size of the building's footprint and the number of inhabitants involved seem to be critical factors in any interpretation of the use of these spaces. The slave quarter wings are both 70 by 20 feet in dimension. Therefore, with two wings at 1,400 square feet each, the new quarter totaled 2,800 gross square feet of space. According to Philip Morgan's findings from his survey of Chesapeake slave housing, most cabins may have housed only three or four slaves and were typically 150 to 250 square feet in size. By using the larger numbers in each range (four occupants for a 250-square-foot cabin), the space per person would be 37.5 square feet. By dividing the 2,800 square feet included in the four rooms in the Greenhouse quarter by an estimated sixty occupants, the result is just over 46 square feet per individual. Thus, on the basis of this comparative evidence, it is plausible that the new quarters could have accommodated up to two-thirds of the slaves living at the Mansion House Farm.[19]

Because the slave community residing at the Mansion House Farm consisted of unattached adult males and females (who either were unmar-

[17] Philander D. Chase, ed., *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series,* 12 vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985–2002), 2:356.

[18] Weekly Farm Report of Anthony Whiting to George Washington, April 7 and 14, 1792, George Washington Papers, Library of Congress (photostat, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association); Carter's order is cited in Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint,* p. 114.

[19] Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint,* p. 111.

ried or whose families resided at one of the outlying farms or at another plantation) as well as single women with children and complete family units (husbands, wives, and children), it is likely that the occupants of the four large rooms were segregated accordingly. While permanent partitions do not appear to have been a feature of the Greenhouse quarters, erecting movable barriers would seem to be a logical solution to the privacy issue. A traveler in South Carolina in the 1740s observed of slave lodgings that there were ''often 2, 3, or 4 Famillys of them in one House, lightly partitioned into so many apartments.''[20]

Since the old quarter it replaced was almost 4,000 square feet in size (1,200 square feet larger than the new building), and the number of slaves at the Mansion House Farm continued to increase from sixty-seven in 1786 to ninety-six in 1799, it is difficult to imagine how the new quarter could have accommodated all of the slaves in residence at the Mansion House Farm. Yet this is what George Washington's plantation manager, George A. Washington, indicated was the plan. He observed in a letter to his employer: ''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.''[21]

There are far too many unknowns to allow any solid conclusions as to the significance of the size and layout of the new quarter. All that can be said with any degree of confidence is that the new building was smaller than the old and that the general layout of four large rooms strongly suggests a communal living arrangement. Since so little is known about the layout of the old quarter, the approximate number of occupants in either building, or the number of slaves who lived in other spaces outside those structures, a direct comparison between the two is virtually impossible. On the other hand, it is clear that Washington was intent on reorganizing much of his plantation operation during this period, and a desire on his part to institute a greater degree of control over the actions of his slaves seems to have been central to this plan.

On a number of occasions, Washington expressed frustration over what he considered to be unwarranted intrusions by slaves into the living area adjacent to his dwelling. In 1792, when George A. Washington wrote to him about the uses for the new quarter, he added that ''until they [the slaves] are all brought together and under proper regulation it is in vain to attempt . . . to protect improvements.'' The function of the new quarter might be interpreted primarily as an attempt to control the activities of the Mansion House slaves by placing them in an environment that was more readily supervised. Further, if upward of sixty slaves were actually housed in four rooms, each with only one fireplace and only one entry, a barracks-style layout with built-in bunks makes a great deal of sense (fig. 7). If the earlier quarter had been divided into smaller units, which would have been more conducive to housing individual families, then that would support the interpretation that the communal layout in the new quarter was a purposeful effort designed to impose stricter control.[22]

Washington's dissatisfaction with the performance of his overseers in carrying out their duties is well documented in his writings. In a December 1793 letter to his recently hired plantation manager, William Pearce, Washington provided his detailed critique of the qualities of each man. In summary, he observed that ''the insufferable conduct of my Overseers may be one mean of frustrating my plan for the next year.'' Getting the overseers ''to be constantly with [their] people,'' while at the same time maintaining a professional relationship with the slaves, appears to have been an ongoing, and generally unsuccessful, campaign. Grouping the slaves at the Mansion House Farm in communal quarters may therefore have been an overt attempt to foster the direct supervision that Washington thought was so crucial to his goal of a more efficiently run enterprise.[23]

Building the new large brick quarter at the Mansion House Farm in 1792 defies a strong regional trend for smaller dwellings occupied by family groups. Philip Morgan has found that slave ''housing evolved from barracks or quarters to family cabins and duplexes'' as ''slave settlements grew more autonomous and communally oriented over time.'' Archaeological findings support this interpretation, as evidence for smaller, more private structures and other indications of

[20] For a listing of the slaves assigned to the Mansion House Farm, see Dorothy Twohig, ed., *The Papers of George Washington, Retirement Series,* 4 vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988–99), 4:528–37; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint,* p. 106.

[21] George Augustine Washington to George Washington, April 8, 1792, George Washington Papers, Library of Congress (photostat, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association).

[22] George Augustine Washington to George Washington, April 8, 1792.

[23] Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 33:188–95, 33:5–12.

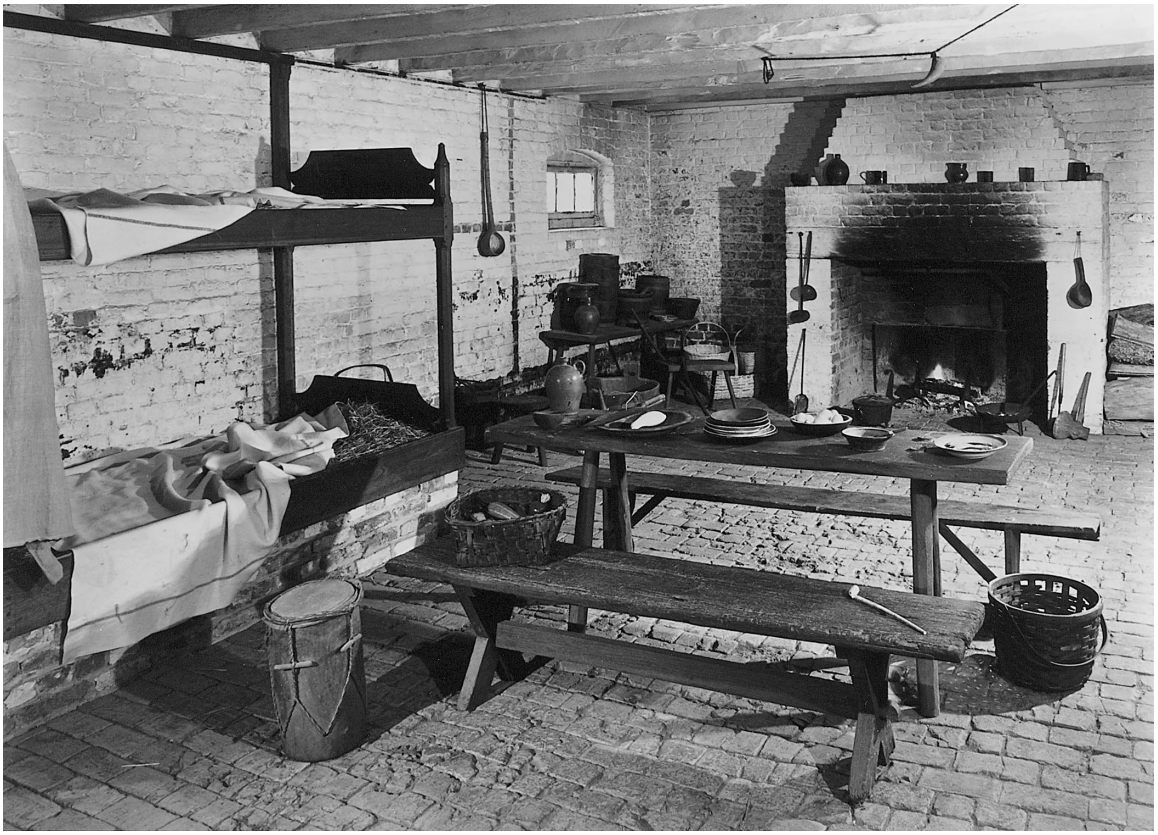

Fig. 7. Interior of a room in one of the reconstructed Greenhouse slave quarters. (Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.) Note that the interpretation includes a communal arrangement and built-in berths along one wall.

increased autonomy by the slaves over their living spaces occurs in greater frequency over the course of the eighteenth century. Several developments seem likely to have contributed to this trend, including the increased economic diversification that became the regional norm during this period, greater stability as the result of normal demographic development, and the increase in more private and substantial dwellings more regularly situated on the landscape that became the standard among the white population during the same era. Finally, as the proportion of Chesapeake slaves that were born in Africa declined to less than 10 percent by 1770, and families replaced large groups of single men, the need for large holding spaces such as barracks was reduced.[24]

[24] Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint,* pp. 61, 103; Fraser D. Neiman, ''Modeling Social Dynamics in Colonial and Ante-bellum Slave Architecture: Monticello in Historical Perspective,'' paper presented at the conference ''Housing Slavery in the Age of Jefferson: Comparative Perspectives,'' Charlottesville, Va., 1998.

Morgan suggests that by the mid eighteenth century, any communal slave quarters in use in the Chesapeake were likely to have been located on ''small plantations, on estates that were in a formative rather than a mature stage, and on units where a number of recently imported Africans were present.'' Washington's decision to erect a communal-style quarter during the last decade of the century is even more noteworthy when considered in this context. By any measure, Mount Vernon occupied a place on the opposite end of the spectrum of attributes enumerated by Morgan as characteristic of plantations expected to have a slave dormitory. Once again, the reason for this unusual behavior seems most likely to be understood as a reflection of George Washington's specific experience in operating Mount Vernon and his resulting desire to improve supervision and increase control over his slaves.[25]

[25] Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint,* p. 105.

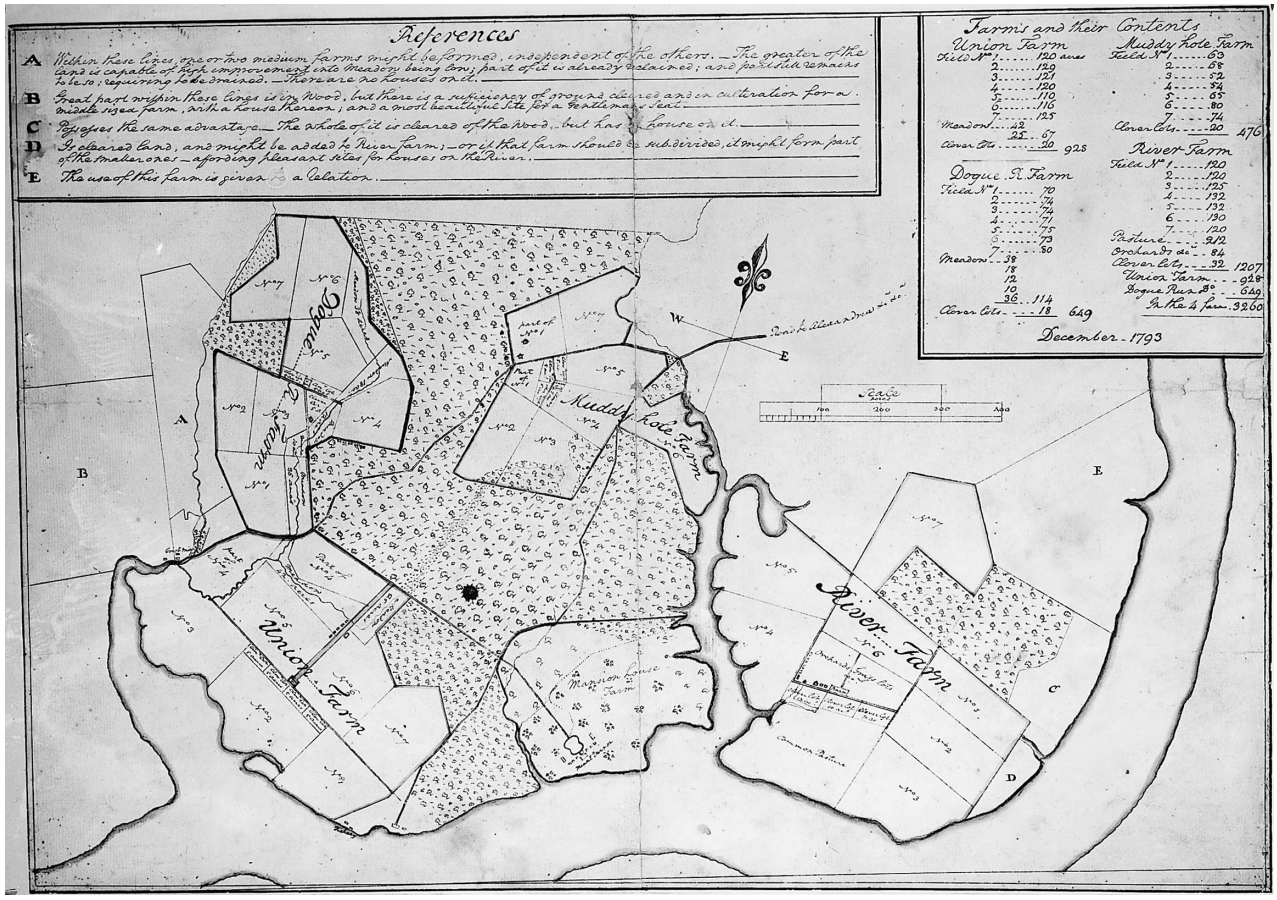

Fig. 8. George Washington, plan of the five Mount Vernon farms, 1793. (Huntington Library.)

At the same time that the finishing touches were being put on the new quarter, Washington was planning for major changes to the layout of the slave cabins on at least two of the four outlying farms (fig. 8). Ordering the quarters to be moved was part of the major reorganization of the entire plantation, which was carried out over an extended period in the 1790s. This was an outgrowth of Washington's systematic attempt to upgrade the plantation's efficiency and profitability and included building several new and specialized farm buildings, introducing a variety of new crops and cultivation methods, upgrading the mill by installing Oliver Evans's new patented labor-saving machinery, and many more improvements.[26]

[26] Washington revealed his plans in a letter to Arthur Young in December 1793; see Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 33:174–83; Alan and Donna Jean Fusonie, *George Washington—Pioneer Farmer* (Mount Vernon, Va.: Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, 1998), pp. 12–24, 37–49; Dennis J. Pogue, '' 'Every Thing Trim, Handsome, and Thriving': Re-creating George Washington's Visionary Farm,'' *Virginia Cavalcade* 48, no. 4 (Autumn 1999): 158–67.

Each of the four farms (River, Union, Muddy Hole, and Dogue Run) was allotted a relatively permanent contingent of field hands, under the direct supervision of an overseer. The majority of the quarters housing these slaves initially seem to have been randomly distributed on the landscape. One exception to this was at River Farm, where (according to a surviving map from 1766) the slave dwellings were arranged in two facing lines. Nevertheless, when Washington carried out his reorganization in the 1790s, it was the River Farm quarters, along with those at Union Farm, that were to be lifted and moved to form a line ''fixed in the lane opposite to the Overseers house.'' The catalyst for the move was the need to combine an existing farm, known as Ferry Farm, with a newly acquired property that together were to make up Union Farm (fig. 9). But as seems to have been the case at the Mansion House, the reason for implementing the greater degree of regimentation in the placement of the quarters appears to relate to a desire for closer

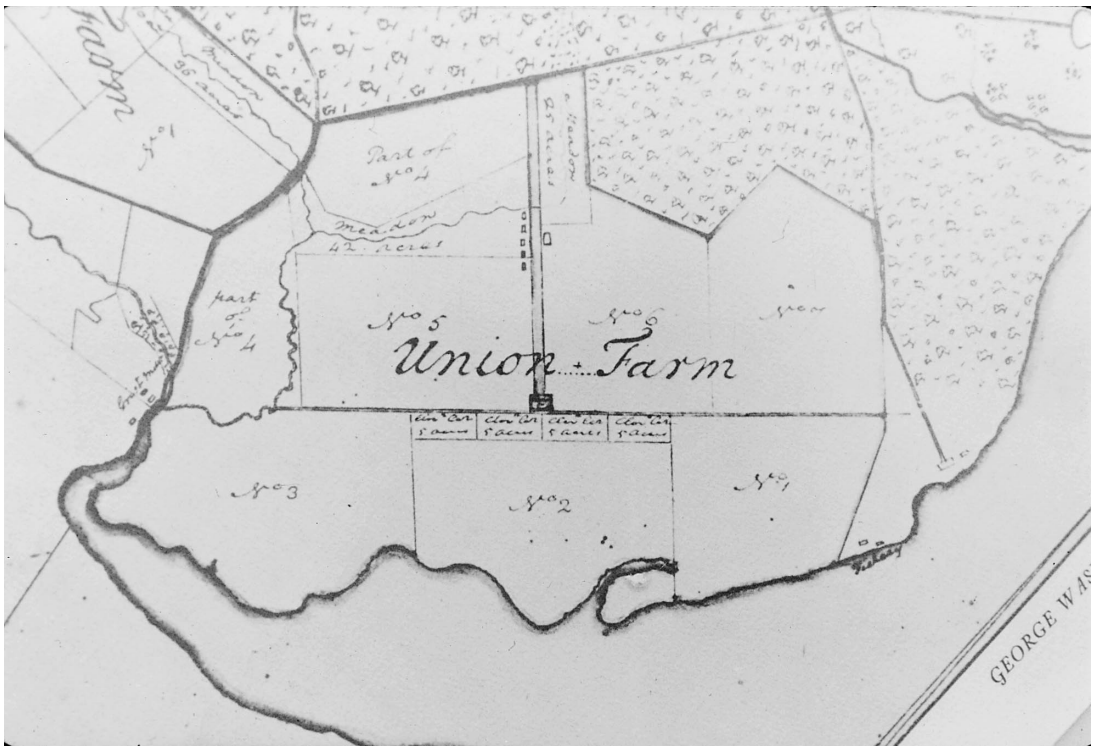

Fig. 9. Detail of figure 8. Note the five slave quarters aligned opposite the overseer's quarters. (Huntington Library.)

surveillance over his slaves on the part of the overseers.[27]

Implementing the plan was more difficult and took much longer than Washington imagined, however. In letter after letter, he attempted to make it clear to his manager how much he desired that the cabins be moved. In June 1791 Washington first mentioned the plan: ''The Houses at the Ferry and French's Plantation [combined to make up Union Farm] are to be removed to the center of both as soon as circumstances will admit it.'' Two years later, he tried again: ''I do not know whether you mean to remove the Houses at Union Farm on Rollers or taking them to pieces . . . there is nothing will be more pleasing to me, than the concentration of the houses on Union Farm.'' Finally, even as late as June 1795, it is clear that the plan had not yet been completely implemented, as Washington was reduced once more to asking his farm manager, ''Are the Cabbins at River and Union farms all removed?''[28]

In 1796 Washington attempted to rent the farms. Given the extensive effort and commitment of resources he had made in attempting to revitalize the plantation over the previous decade, this decision seems to indicate a significant change in attitude. Washington was in the final years of his second term as president, and he was clearly looking forward to his imminent retirement from public service. On one level, therefore, his decision to attempt to rent the farms undoubtedly marks a desire to simplify his life as he advanced in age. But it also seems to reflect an admission on Washington's part that his ambitious plans to reinvent Mount Vernon as a progressive agricultural enterprise had failed. It would come as no surprise if the prospect of finally being able to ''rid himself of Negroes,'' the goal that he had repeated many times over the

[27] The quarters at Muddy Hole Farm remained scattered in what appears to be a random pattern that may have been the norm before the reorganization (see fig. 8). The 1766 map of River Farm is reproduced in John Michael Vlach, ''Plantation Landscapes of the Antebellum South,'' in Edward D.C. Campbell and Kym S. Rice, eds., *Before Freedom Came: African-American Life in the Antebellum South* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), p. 22; Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 33:495, 34:15, 31:308.

[28] Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 31:308, 34:212.

years, was one of the most attractive aspects of this plan.[29]

The description of the properties and their buildings made at that time provides important information on the character of the quarters. At Union Farm, the rental advertisement indicated, ''Thirty black laborers (men and women) being the usual number which have been employed on this farm, are, with their children, warmly lodged chiefly in houses of their own building.'' The housing at the remaining farms is described as ''of the same kind,'' and estimated to accommodate thirty slaves at River Farm, approximately twenty at Dogue Run Farm, and fifteen slaves at Muddy Hole Farm. In each instance, the number of slaves actually in residence was understood to be considerably greater as the figure given did not include children. The 1793 plantation map Washington had produced at the time he first contemplated the rental scheme, depicts five slave quarters at each of the farms. This remarkable degree of regularity suggests that the structures depicted are representational rather than factual.[30]

The 1799 inventory lists seventy-six slaves in residence at Union Farm. If the map was, in fact, an accurate rendering of the actual number of quarters in existence, and each quarter was equal in size and the field hands were distributed evenly among the buildings, each quarter would have housed what appears to be an unreasonably large number of occupants, approximately fifteen individuals. There apparently were at least two sizes of quarters, however, as Washington referred to ''the largest kind'' and ''the smaller ones or cabbins'' in December 1793 when he directed that the quarters be moved. The ''largest kind'' of quarters were to be relocated with the assistance of the carpenters, while the ''cabbins'' were expected to be moved by the slaves themselves ''with a little assistance of Carts.'' According to Morgan, in this period the term *quarter* generally denoted a building used to house unrelated laborers, and a *cabin* was lodging for an individual family. At least some of the larger buildings were likely to have been two-room structures, however, as they were described in 1776 as ''built for two families, with a chimney in the middle.'' This type of housing, referred to as a ''duplex,'' or ''double house,'' seems to have become more popular over the course of the eighteenth century. It appears likely that the field workers were distributed among the dwellings according to these distinctions, in a manner similar to how the servants and craftspeople were organized among the four rooms at the Mansion House Farm quarter.[31]

There is no documentation giving precise dimensions for the quarters at the outlying farms, but one overseer's house was described as 16 by 20 feet in size, and that footprint also has been found to be fairly common for slave quarters in this period. The dimensions of the other cabins could have been as small as 16 by 12 feet or 16 by 14 feet—as both dimensions appear with regularity in the documentary record pertaining to buildings of this type during the eighteenth century.[32]

At 224 square feet of space (the size of a house 16 by 14 feet in dimension), five of these buildings would have provided extremely cramped quarters for the large numbers of people who required housing. If the quarters at Union Farm were of this type, then as little as 15 square feet of space would have been available for each of the seventy-six slaves residing there. On the other hand, if the five buildings were the larger quarters, which for the purposes of this exercise are assumed to be 16 by 20 feet in size, then the square footage would increase to approximately 21 feet per person. In either case, if the depiction of only five quarters at Union Farm on Washington's map of the plantation is accurate, the amount of space available per person, no matter whether the larger quarters or the smaller cabins were used, would be much less than the space available to the slaves living at the Mansion House Farm quarter, and much less than the norm for Chesapeake slaves suggested by Morgan's study. This analysis therefore supports the assessment that it is highly unlikely that the number of structures shown on the map of the five farms is correct.[33]

Given the generally small sizes of the houses of the enslaved workers living in the Chesapeake, and the absence of artificial lighting, and the necessarily small dimensions of the windows commonly in use, it is no surprise that many domestic activities were conducted outdoors. Morgan cites many examples of visitors' accounts that note this

[29] Lee, ''Mount Vernon Plantation,'' pp. 34–38.

[30] Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 34:433–41, 33:196.

[31] Chase, *Papers, Revolutionary War Series,* 3:271; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint,* p. 108. Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 33:178; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint,* p. 106.

[32] Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 33:178; George W. McDaniel, *Hearth and Home: Preserving a People's Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), pp. 54–55.

[33] Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint,* p. 111.

feature of slave life. Even if the amount of indoor space available was as large as suggested by Morgan's comparative research (37½ square feet per person) the availability of outdoor work areas adjoining each quarter would have been a welcome addition. The option to use the surrounding yards for their own purposes seems much more likely to have been the case in situations such as the Mount Vernon outlying farms, where the slaves had a greater degree of autonomy as a result of their distance from the home of the master. A complaint about the behavior of the slaves living at the Mansion House Farm made by George Washington in a letter to his plantation manager suggests the other side of the two inherently conflicting perspectives on this issue: ''There are a great number of Negro children at the Quarters belonging to the house people; but they have Always been forbid (except two or 3 young ones belonging to the Cook, and the Mulatto fellow Frank in the house, her husband; both of whom live in the Kitchen) from coming within the Gates of the Inclosures of the Yards, Gardens &ct; that they may not be breaking the Shrubs, and doing other mischief; but I believe they are often in there notwithstanding.''[34]

The quarters and cabins on the farms were constructed of logs. A French visitor to the plantation, Jean-Pierre Brissot de Warville, noted in 1788 that ''three hundred Negroes live in a number of log houses in different parts'' of Washington's estate. In a letter written in September 1794 to his plantation manager, William Pearce, Washington expressed his exasperation at the delays in moving the quarters and made reference to ''daubing and filling'' the walls. In another letter the next year, Washington specified the need to fill the spaces ''between the logs of the Cabbins.'' Logs were a popular building material used for slave quarters throughout the Chesapeake during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[35]

Washington's remark that the cabins at the outlying farms were built by their inhabitants suggests that the design of the structures probably was also left up to the slaves. In contrast with the brick quarter at the Mansion House Farm, which was designed by Washington with very specific goals in mind, it seems likely that aside from the regimented arrangement of the cabins and their overall suitability as shelter, the construction details probably were not of great interest to him. Although certain architectural characteristics found in African American housing in other areas of the South (particularly the ''shotgun house'' form—spatial units of ten- or twelve-foot squares and thatched roofs and wattle wall construction) have been postulated as African-inspired, the vast majority of Virginia slave houses appear to fall within the dominant Anglo-American building tradition. By the early seventeenth century, British settlers in the Chesapeake had already adopted log cabin construction techniques for a variety of support structures, and by the 1720s it had become the predominant form for buildings of all types on the Virginia-Carolina frontier. Cheap and relatively easy to erect and constructed with materials that were in relative abundance, log buildings were the ideal solution to the problem of housing large numbers of slaves, while still allowing them to congregate in the family units that were becoming the norm.[36]

A 1908 photograph shows an extremely dilapidated small log building that was purported to be a quarter at Mount Vernon (fig. 10). While the documentation for a Mount Vernon connection is sketchy, in its overall appearance the structure is similar to any number of log slave cabins depicted in mid nineteenth-century images, and there is nothing about the structure that appears to be diagnostically post–eighteenth century in date. Hewing logs on two faces was one of many options (the others being splitting the logs or leaving them round) in common use in the eighteenth century. The presence of a row of joists running above the height of the door indicates that the cabin included a half-story, and this innovation may be more typical of cabins dating to the nineteenth century. As early as 1753, however, a contract was made to build ''two round log houses'' in Augusta County, Virginia, that featured a half-story in each, so the characteristic was not unknown at the time. Furthermore, the presence of a half-story rather than a simple loft

[34] Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint,* pp. 120–23; Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 33:142–43.

[35] J. P. Brissot de Warville, *New Travels in the United States of America, 1788,* ed. Durand Echeverria (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1964), p. 343; Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 33:495, 34:217; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint,* p. 109.

[36] For a discussion of possible African influences on housing in the American South, see Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 112–26; Dell Upton, ''Slave Housing in 18th-Century Virginia,'' report to the Department of Social and Cultural History (1982), on file at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, p. 8; Carl R. Lounsbury, ed., *An Illustrated Glossary of Early Southern Architecture and Landscape* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 216–18.

Fig. 10. A decrepit log cabin purported to have been a slave quarter located at Mount Vernon, 1908. (Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.)

would provide much needed living space and may have been a highly prized commodity given the apparently large numbers of occupants these buildings seem to have accommodated.[37]

There appear to be no more than a half-dozen eighteenth-century slave quarters that survive in Maryland and Virginia combined, and none of those structures are from outlying farm contexts. Furthermore, even though log cabins were the most common building type used for slave houses in the Chesapeake, none built before approximately the second quarter of the nineteenth century survive today. Therefore, the evidence provided by this photograph, in concert with documentary data from Mount Vernon and elsewhere and with the information gathered from an examination of the small number of surviving early quarters and log buildings in the region, have been used to develop a plan to re-create a log slave cabin at Mount Vernon in the coming years.[38]

There is no indication of a chimney in the photograph, as the opening for the fireplace that is visible on the gable end appears to be boarded up, but documentary evidence suggests that at least some of the Mount Vernon cabins were outfitted with chimneys made of wood. This was a common building technique found on slave quarters as well as on the homes of those of modest means well into the nineteenth century (fig. 11). In January 1795, Washington wrote to his plantation manager, William Pearce, asking after the health of an unspecified number of ''negro children'' who were injured when a chimney

[37] Upton, ''Slave Housing,'' p. 8; Lounsbury, *Illustrated Glossary,* pp. 216–18.

[38] Upton, ''Slave Housing,'' pp. 12–19.

Fig. 11. An example of a one-room log cabin with a half-story above and a wooden chimney, ca. 1900. (Virginia Historical Society.)

attached to a building apparently fell. Given that one of the benefits of wooden chimneys was that they could easily be jettisoned in the event that they caught fire, a chimney of this type may have been at fault in this instance. In the case of the duplex quarters, their interior chimneys presumably were constructed of brick and/or stone as insurance against fire.[39]

What little evidence exists suggests that the farm quarters were relatively poorly constructed and outfitted with only the barest of essentials. In 1775 Lund Washington wrote to his employer, stating that, ''Some of our negro quarters are so very bad, that I am obliged to have them mended, so as to last this winter.'' Numerous visitors remarked on the qualities of the various structures they observed at Mount Vernon, and several commented on the poor condition of the slave housing. One Frenchman who visited in 1797 observed that the slaves were ''housed in wretched wooden cabins.'' Julian Niemcewicz, a Polish traveler in America who visited Mount Vernon in June 1798, left a graphic description of one of the quarters: ''We entered one of the huts of the Blacks, for one can not call them by the name of houses. They are more miserable than the most miserable of the cottages of our peasants.'' The household furnishings seem to have been similarly spartan, as Niemcewicz goes on to describe the interior: ''The husband and wife sleep on a mean pallet, the children on the ground; a very bad fireplace, some utensils for cooking, but in the middle of this poverty some cups and a teapot. A boy of 15 was lying on the ground, sick, and in terrible convulsions. The Gl. had sent to Alexandria to fetch a doctor. A very small garden planted with vegetables was close by, with 5 or 6 hens, each one leading ten to fifteen chickens.''[40]

[39] Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint,* p. 110; Upton, ''Slave Housing,'' p. 9; Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 31:338, 34:78; William M. Kelso, ''Mulberry Row: Slave Life at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello,'' *Archaeology* (September/October 1986): 32–34; Sobel, *World They Made Together,* pp. 110–19.

[40] Chase, *Papers, Revolutionary War Series,* 2:423. In June 1791, George Washington observed that ''some of the People at that place [Dogue Run Farm] complain much of the Leakiness of their Houses'' (Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 31:307). Louis-Philippe, *Diary of My Travels in America, Louis-Philippe, King of France, 1830–1848* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1977), pp. 53–55; Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, *Under Their Vine and Fig Tree: Travels through America in 1797–1799, 1805* (Elizabeth, N.J.: Grassman Publishing, 1965), p. 100. Sobel, *World They Made Together,* p. 102, and Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint,* pp. 114–15, offer strong support for this depiction, but archaeological research at Mount Vernon and elsewhere indicates that the quantity and quality of material possessions used by slaves was variable, depending on such factors as the

Fig. 12. Servants' Hall at Mount Vernon, 1775. (Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.) The photograph was taken during the process of repainting in 1961.

It is quite a contrast between this squalid depiction and what is known about the building called ''Servants' Hall'' (fig. 12). This structure is located at the Mansion House Farm and was erected in 1775 as part of a campaign of rebuilding and expansion. The previous year, Washington had embarked upon an ambitious program that eventually would double the size of the Mansion House. The four outbuildings that had framed the approach to the house from the west were removed to make way for a new complex of structures that would better complement the larger, more fashionable dwelling. Finally, the surrounding gardens and grounds were similarly revamped according to current English ideas in picturesque landscape design.[41]

For the great majority of the time, the Servants' Hall appears to have served a very specialized function as quarters for the servants of visitors to Mount Vernon. The one documented exception to this pattern is a three-year period in the 1790s when William Pearce, the newly hired plantation manager, lived in the building along with his family. The traditional function of the building is spelled out by George Washington in a letter to Pearce: ''The right wing of my dwelling house as you possibly may have noticed, and hear called the Hall (being kept altogether for the use

occupations of the slaves, the location of the quarter, the size of the plantation, and the wealth of the owner, with house servants and craftsmen living at the home plantation most likely to enjoy a higher standard of material life; see Pogue, ''Archaeology of Plantation Life,'' pp. 74–83; and Kelso, ''Mulberry Row,'' pp. 29–35.

[41] Dennis J. Pogue, ''Giant in the Earth: George Washington, Landscape Designer,'' in Rebecca Yamin and Karen Bescherer Metheny, eds., *Landscape Archaeology: Reading and Interpreting the American Historical Landscape* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), pp. 52–69.

of Strangers) has two good rooms below (with tiled floors) and as many above, all with fireplaces. This will accommodate your family (being a larger house) better than Crow's; and by being here, you will have the use of my Kitchen, the Cook belonging thereto, Frank the House Servant, a boy also in the House.''[42]

That such a large and prominent structure could be reserved only for the occasional use of the servants of visitors seems remarkable. At 40 by 20 feet in dimension and with two usable floors, the Servants' Hall was larger than the great majority of the houses lived in by Washington's fellow Virginia planters. According to Camille Wells's study of houses advertised for sale in the *Virginia Gazette* between 1736 and 1780, only 23 percent of the 169 planters' dwellings listed were larger than the Servants' Hall at Mount Vernon. The building's interior finishes were also of a high quality. This is testified to by the fact that the structure was sufficient to satisfy the requirements of Pearce and his family for several years. With a tile floor, glazed windows, both a mop board and chair rail, plastered walls, and substantial brick fireplaces in each of the four rooms, it represented a considerable step up in comfort for most Virginians, let alone for slaves.[43]

Washington's ability to devote what would have been a significant outlay of resources to a building that may have been unoccupied most of the year is a testament to his relatively great wealth. But it also probably reflects his ambition to lay claim to the status of membership in the highest level of the Virginia gentry. The significance of the possession of such a specialized structure certainly would not have been lost on the gentlemen whose African American slaves and white servants periodically resided there. Similarly, the grand appearance of the new brick Greenhouse slave quarters may well have reflected Washington's desire to live up to his exalted political position in the eyes of important guests.

Soon after Pearce took up residence in the Servant's Hall, he proposed making a number of alterations to the building. Washington gave his permission in a letter dated April 13, 1794: ''Mr. Pearce: By your letter of the 9th. instt. . . . I find you wish to open a communication between the lower rooms, in what is called the Servants Hall, and to make a closet therein; against the latter I have no objection at all, nor against the first provided the doing it does not cut away a brace, and thereby weaken the house.'' Surviving structural evidence indicates that Pearce did, in fact, make the changes he proposed. Once he added the doorway in the partition to allow direct communication between the first-floor rooms, it would have been much more convenient for him and his family to use the entire structure for their quarters. The second-floor rooms undoubtedly continued to be used as bedrooms. The west room could have accommodated Pearce's office and still could have functioned as a general domestic space. The east room, with its massive fireplace, would have made a spacious kitchen. But in his 1793 letter to Pearce, Washington specified that ''my kitchen'' would be available for Pearce's use. Presumably Washington was referring to the detached kitchen on the circle opposite the Servants' Hall. Because the Servant's Hall was constructed under the direction of Lund Washington while his cousin and employer, George Washington, was away fighting in the Revolutionary War, confusion about the intended function of the building led Lund to build the oversized fireplace (mistakenly intended to serve the clothes-washing operation), which was left in place rather than changed once the true use of the building was understood. A half-century later, artist Eastman Johnson painted a scene of a black woman cooking on the hearth of this fireplace, suggesting that by that late date the structure may have been converted for use as a permanent quarter (fig. 13).[44]

The use of the east room in the years before Pearce added the partition door is even less clear. With its doorway opening on the colonnade, this room was much more readily accessible from the Mansion House than from the rest of the Servant's Hall. Because visiting servants would seem to have little need for a space to prepare food, possibly this room was used as a second kitchen in support of the Mansion House. But if so, no evidence for this function has been found in the documentary record.

As a group, the structures used to lodge slaves at Mount Vernon span the range of types encoun-

[42] Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 33:111.

[43] Camille Wells, ''The Planter's Prospect: Houses, Outbuildings, and Rural Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia,'' *Winterthur Portfolio* 28, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 1–31. For more evidence on the relatively spare living conditions endured by most of the white population in Virginia, see Sobel, *World They Made Together,* pp. 100–101; and Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint,* p. 111.

[44] Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 33:324–25; Chase, *Papers, Revolutionary War Series,* 2:477–78; Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 33:111.

Fig. 13. Eastman Johnson, *Interior of Servant's Quarter at Mount Vernon,* 1864. Oil on board; H. 12½″; W. 20½″. (Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.)

tered in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake. These included quarters that were used exclusively as slave dwellings. But some, if not most, of the outbuildings at the Mansion House Farm served as housing for slaves as well as serving other functions. A clear hierarchy of housing types is apparent, which relate to the occupation and place of residence of the slaves. Certainly, the most obvious division is between the slaves at the Mansion House Farm, where most of the servants and craftspeople lived in more pretentious but no less crowded communal structures, and the field hands at the outlying farms who lived in more humble cabins of their own building.

The existence of other types of quarters renders the picture of slave housing at Mount Vernon even more complex, however. In terms of comfort and overall amenities, the facilities for the visiting slaves lodged in the Servants' Hall not only were well above the field hands' cabins but also surpassed the new brick slave quarter where house servants and craftsmen lived. Once again, this structure seems best understood as a tool in Washington's rise to gentry status and as a reflection of his self-image. Next in terms of comfort are the slaves living above buildings such as the Kitchen, who undoubtedly had a much greater degree of privacy than those individuals living in either the Greenhouse slave quarters or in the outlying cabins. Little can be said about the other cabins and ''houses'' that appear to have existed at the Mansion House Farm, but in terms of size and level of finish, they seem likely to have shared a greater affinity with those at the outlying farms than with the other brick quarters at the home farm.

The efforts made in the 1790s to reconfigure at least some elements of the slave housing at Mount Vernon seems to mark a shift in Washington's attitude toward the treatment of his slaves. Abundant documentary evidence indicates that he was attempting to reorganize Mount Vernon as a more efficient economic enterprise, while at the same time struggling with the realities of unmotivated slave laborers and their only slightly more interested supervisors. Given these efforts, it seems noteworthy that only a few years after building his new brick quarter and rearranging

the slave cabins, and only a year or two after erecting new barns and completing other major structural improvements, Washington attempted unsuccessfully to rent the great majority of his property. At the very least, this decision seems likely to be a reflection of Washington's frustration in trying to adapt a system of slave labor to his innovative vision of Mount Vernon's future.[45]

Washington hoped to hire out the slave field hands to the farmers who might lease his lands, and in so doing sought a means by which he could justify freeing those individuals. By renting most of his acreage, he would no longer require large numbers of slaves to support his family. The continued employment of the field hands on the farms would enable the slave families to remain intact, while providing the financial security they would need. That this was Washington's intent (and was the most attractive aspect of the entire rental scheme) is demonstrated by his comments in a letter he wrote to his secretary, Tobias Lear, in 1794. ''I have another motive,'' he wrote, that ''is indeed more powerful than all the rest, namely to liberate a certain species of property which I possess, very repugnantly to my own feelings; but which imperious necessity compels.''[46]

After receiving only a few serious enquiries in response to his advertisements, nothing came of Washington's rental plan. Although he never seems to have expressed his thoughts on the topic in writing, his disappointment must have been acute. Three years later, when he wrote his last will and testament, Washington was left with the unpleasant task of devising a final solution for the distribution of Mount Vernon's slaves. Of the 316 enslaved men, women, and children then living on the plantation, 40 belonged to a neighboring planter. Of the remainder, 123 were owned by Washington, and 153 were dower slaves legally bound to the heirs of the estate of Martha Washington's first husband, Daniel Parke Custis. Neither George nor Martha Washington were at liberty to free the dower slaves. It was the spectre of the dissolution of the families that had resulted from decades of intermarriage between the Custis and Washington slaves that was a stumbling block to any manumission plan Washington might devise.[47]

In the end, Washington reached a compromise, which succinctly characterizes what can only be described as his ambivalent feelings toward slave holding. Apparently personally unwilling to face up to the ''painful sensations'' that he knew would attend the breakup of the families, Washington stipulated that his slaves would be freed upon the death of his wife, Martha. Since he knew that she could not free the dower slaves, he was fully aware of the impact of his decision. Clearly uncomfortable with the knowledge that the freedom of so many depended on her death, Martha Washington decided to manumit her husband's slaves during her lifetime. This was done on December 15, 1800, just a year after George's death and almost eighteen months before Martha herself died. While there is no evidence recording the reactions of the Mount Vernon slaves to this event, either on the part of those freed or those who remained in bondage, it must have been the cause of much sadness as well as joy.[48]

[45] Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 34:433–38. For an especially perceptive analysis of Washington's plans to transform Mount Vernon into an agricultural model for the new nation, and the frustrations Washington suffered as a consequence of attempting to adapt the slave labor system to that effort, see Lee, ''Mount Vernon Plantation,'' pp. 13–45.

[46] Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 33:358.

[47] Hirschfeld, *George Washington and Slavery,* pp. 209–23.

[48] Fitzpatrick, *Writings,* 37:276–77. John P. Riley, ''Written with My Own Hand: George Washington's Last Will and Testament,'' *Virginia Cavalcade* 48, no. 4 (Autumn 1999): 168–77, explores in detail the steps Washington took to avoid breaking up the slave families.