The Private Life of George Washington’s Slaves
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The slaves of George Washington must have found the hours when they were not working for their master very precious, for it was then they had the time and the freedom to pursue their own interests and to exercise some measure of control over their own lives. Evenings, Sundays, and holidays (Christmas, Easter Monday, the Monday after Pentecost, and official days of prayer and fasting), the African Americans at Mount Vernon occupied themselves with activities to benefit themselves and their families, rather than their master. Slaves on the four outlying farms of the Mount Vernon estate may have had even more freedom in their private lives than those residing at the Mansion House (Mount Vernon), where personal servants had to be available well into the evening, and where opportunities for close supervision by the master and his family abounded. However, even in their free time and in the most personal aspects of their lives, Washington's slaves were never free of his ultimate control.

Lacking the kind of voluminous documentation that outlines the lives of George Washington and his family, modern historians studying the African American community at Mount Vernon must pore over such sources as Washington's 1786 and 1799 censuses of his slaves, court records, archaeological artifacts, and account books to assemble a picture of the slaves' everyday lives. At the height of its development as a plantation, Mount Vernon comprised eight thousand acres divided into five separate farms--Mansion House, Dogue Run, Union, Muddy Hole, and River--each of which contained a small village of African-born and Virginia-born slaves. By the time of Washington's death in 1799, roughly ninety percent of the plantation's population consisted of over three hundred African American slaves (forty of whom Washington rented from a neighbor); the remaining ten percent were the Washington family, white hired workers, and their families.

The largest slave community, ninety people, lived at Mansion House Farm, many of them artisans who practiced the multiple crafts needed to supply the plantation and keep it running. The group included tradesmen such as bricklayers and carpenters; cooks, dairy maids, gardeners, millers, and distillers, who produced and processed the food; people who made clothes for the other slaves; ditch diggers; wagon and cart drivers and postilions for the carriages; and the butlers, maids, and footmen who worked in the mansion. The other slave villages ranged in size from forty-five residents at Dogue Run and fifty-seven at River to forty-one at Muddy Hole and seventy-six at Union. Most of the workers on the outlying farms labored in the fields.

During their time off, most people probably tried to catch up on their rest, given the usual dawn-to-dusk, six-day work week. The number of personal things to be done and the limited time in which to do them, however, meant that the slaves' few available free hours were probably fairly busy. Among the most important activities on a daily basis were housekeeping chores, such as tending chickens and garden plots, cooking and preserving the produce of those gardens, and
caring for clothing. The latter activity was a special concern to George Washington, because his slaves sometimes mended their clothes with fabric intended for other purposes. For instance, in 1792, farm manager Anthony Whiting complained that a number of bags or sacks, which would have been useful in transporting wheat to the mill, had been "Stole by the Negroes & otherwise Lost." Whiting recommended that bags purchased in the future be made of coarse sacking from Europe, "which a Negro Could not mend his Cloaths with without a discovery" and that, in addition, the sacks be marked on both sides.

A number of off-duty activities helped a slave family earn money, which they could then use to buy small luxuries and thus raise their standard of living. In the fall of 1798, Mount Vernon's farm manager, James Anderson, placed a notice in a local paper about a pocketbook that a slave had found along the road outside of Alexandria. The rightful owner, after proving that it was his, could reclaim his property after paying for the advertisement and "allowing something for the Negro who found it."

A slave might receive a tip for special services. In the spring of 1768, when George Washington left the home of his brother-in-law, Burwell Bassett, he was probably acting properly when he left fifteen shillings and nine pence for the "Servants," who would have had extra duties to perform in caring for him or for any other houseguest. When a slave who belonged to overseer James Cleveland returned a horse to Mount Vernon in the summer of 1783, he received three shillings, which he could, presumably, spend as he wished. In 1785 Washington gave several slaves six shillings in gratitude for their assistance in getting his valet, William Lee, to the home of a friend, Dr. David Stuart, after Lee broke his kneecap while surveying with Washington. (It is unclear whether the people were from Mount Vernon or from Stuart's home, or if they just happened upon the accident.) Washington's contemporaries, benefitting from the help of one of his slaves, would quite likely have tipped them as well.

Where someone of Washington's social class paid a slave for service with cash, a person of lower rank might barter something in their possession. In 1784, for example, a young, indigent white woman stole from the wife of Charles MacIver, a Highland Scot living in Alexandria, garments including a dress (of Indian chintz with a white ground and red stripes) and an apron. The thief gave the dress and apron to one of Dr. Stuart's slaves in exchange for ferrying her across a body of water; the slave then gave the clothes to his wife.

George Washington purchased foodstuffs from not only his own slaves, but from those on neighboring farms as well. Eggs, chickens, ducks, melons, cucumbers, and honey all found their way from the quarters to the mansion table over the years. Washington's slaves also sold their chickens in Alexandria, in order to "procure for themselves a few amenities," wrote Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, a Polish traveler who visited Mount Vernon in early June of 1798. (Like many European tourists, he was fascinated by the institution of slavery and recorded in his journal a number of observations about George Washington's slaves, which have proven invaluable to later researchers.) Other slaves made small items for sale to the Washington household: in 1792, a slave named Easter received sixpence in exchange for a broom, which had presumably been crafted in the quarters.
While slaves may have sold some of their things door-to-door in the neighborhood, they found another destination for their goods and foodstuffs at the Sunday market in Alexandria, nine miles away, where slaves from the surrounding countryside could sell until 9:00 in the morning. Of course, this meant an early morning for anyone trying to get into the city, which was a trip of one-and-a-half to two hours on horseback, two-and-a-half or three hours on foot. The financial and social rewards, however, must have made the effort worthwhile. In addition to serving as a means of making money, the Sunday market was a good place to befriend slaves from Alexandria and from outlying plantations. Toward the end of George Washington's life, farm manager James Anderson tightened the privilege a bit by requiring that slaves from Mount Vernon have a special pass in order to do business at the market. Anderson was not simply being capricious but was complying with a Virginia law of 1785 that forbid sales to or purchases from slaves without the permission of their owner or overseer.

The leisure pursuits of fishing and hunting could also lead to financial improvement. Washington's fondness for fish was well-known, even outside his household, so he was a likely customer for anyone with an impressive catch to sell. In the late summer of 1790, he paid three shillings to "a Negroe of Capt. Marshals" for two rockfish. The Mount Vernon slaves hunted and trapped animals for income, both physical and documentary evidence suggests. Within the past decade, archaeologists working in the cellar of a slave dwelling on the Mansion House Farm came across both gun flints and lead shot in a variety of sizes; remains of small mammals (rabbits, squirrels, opossums, and raccoons); and a variety of wild birds (several types of ducks, coot, grouse, partridge, and passenger pigeon). Contrary to popular belief, slaves could legally own guns under certain circumstances. A Virginia statute of 1785 forbid slaves to keep firearms unless they were either traveling with their master or had written permission from him or their employer to have a gun. Washington clearly knew about and sanctioned the keeping of guns by at least some of his slaves (although no such documents of permission appear at Mount Vernon). He even provided shot on occasion, most likely for hunting game for the Washingtons' table or for hunting vermin, as on 19 January 1787, when slave Tom Davis received one pound of shot.

In the fall of 1792, Davis and another slave, Sambo Anderson, sold their master eleven dozen birds. Both men were well-known hunters. Davis, who regularly supplied the Mount Vernon household with fresh game, had a "great Newfoundland dog" named Gunner as his hunting companion. Ducks were extremely plentiful along the Potomac in the eighteenth century, and one shot from Davis's "old British musket" generally brought down "as many of those delicious birds as would supply the larder for a week," said George Washington Parke Custis, Martha Washington's grandson. Anderson had been born in Africa and in the 1750s had been enslaved and brought to Virginia, where he became a carpenter. A vivid character, he wore gold rings in his ears and adorned his face with tribal scars and tattoos. After his manumission in 1800 under the terms of Washington's will, Anderson supported himself by hunting wild game, which he sold to hotels and to "the most respectable families" in Alexandria, according to an 1876 correspondent to the Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser. He made enough money from this endeavor to purchase and emancipate two members of his family, William and Eliza. Sambo Anderson probably earned money from those same sources while Washington was alive.
The slaves sometimes made a little extra money by preventing trespassers from hunting on Washington's property. In keeping with long-standing British traditions that limited hunting on an estate to the landowner or to those who had his express permission, Washington forbid hunting by outsiders and ordered his slaves to investigate immediately any gunshots heard on his land. In the fall of 1787, a "Party of young Gentlemen" sailed down from Alexandria to hunt ducks along the Potomac, and had the misfortune to land their craft near Washington's River Farm. Three slaves of the plantation, one of whom was armed with a gun, approached the young men and, according to Joseph Lewis Jr., a member of the party, "insisted" that one of them shoot a squirrel, which he proceeded to do. They enticed two of the group farther into the woods and, probably, therefore onto Washington's property with the promise of more squirrels, then turned on them "in the most Violent manner" and took away their guns. As they ran off, the slaves exulted that they had just earned £10, probably as a monetary reward for disarming the trespassing hunters, and were immediately taking the guns to George Washington.

Slaves of the eighteenth century sometimes turned to the perfectly acceptable means of making money by selling their teeth to dentists. Since at least the end of the Middle Ages, poor people had often sold their teeth for use in both dentures and in tooth-transplant operations for those wealthy enough to afford the procedures. Sometimes the teeth were perfectly healthy; others were diseased and needed to be pulled anyway. In 1780 a French dentist named Jean Pierre Le Moyer (also called Le Mayeur, Le Mayeur, and Joseph Lemaire) came to America, possibly as a naval surgeon with the French forces commanded by the Comte de Rochambeau, and over the next decade treated patients in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Alexandria, and Richmond. He seems to have had an extensive practice in tooth transplants, but the results of the procedure were short-lived, usually less than one or two years. Transplantable teeth were hard to come by, and in 1783 Le Moyer even went so far as to advertise in the New York papers for "persons disposed to sell their front teeth, or any of them," netting the donor two guineas (forty-two shillings) per tooth. In Richmond, he offered anyone but slaves a similar amount for their front teeth. Technical problems made it impossible to transplant molars, so the operation was probably useful primarily for cosmetic reasons. Le Moyer first treated George Washington's teeth at his military headquarters in 1783.

The following year, in May of 1784, Washington paid several unnamed "Negroes," presumably Mount Vernon slaves, 122 shillings for nine teeth, slightly less than one-third the going rate advertised in the papers, "on acct. of the French Dentis [sic] Doctr. Lemay [sic],&quot; almost certainly Le Moyer. Over the next four years, the dentist was a frequent and apparently favorite guest on the plantation. Whether the Mount Vernon slaves sold their teeth to the dentist for any patient who needed them or specifically for George Washington is unknown, although Washington's payment suggests that they were for his own use. Washington probably underwent the transplant procedure--"I confess I have been staggered in my belief in the efficacy of transplantation," he told Richard Varick, his friend and wartime clerk, in 1784--and thus it may well be that some of the human teeth implanted to improve his appearance, or used to manufacture his dentures, came from his own slaves.

When the slaves' entrepreneurial activities threatened Washington's interests, his concern with their private lives came to the fore. In the fall of 1794, for example, he learned that Sally Green, the abandoned wife of one of his white carpenters and the daughter of his old servant, Thomas
Bishop, was thinking of moving to Alexandria to open a shop. The president feared that with her long-standing ties to the Mount Vernon slaves, the shop would be "no more than a receptacle for stolen produce" from his farms, he told his manager, William Pearce. He asked Pearce to caution Green against dealing with his slaves, for if "she deals with them at all," Washington thought, "she will be unable to distinguish between stolen, or not stolen things." He warned that if she came under any suspicion of dealing in stolen goods, "she need expect no further countenance or support from me."

His slaves' ownership of dogs also troubled and economically threatened George Washington. They apparently trained the animals quite well. "It is astonishing to see the command under which their dogs are," Washington commented to his manager Anthony Whiting in 1792. Although the slaves probably kept the dogs ostensibly for hunting, both men felt that they used the dogs during "night robberies" to round up Mount Vernon sheep, which they then sold to certain outside "receivers." Washington and Whiting also feared that dogs might kill the sheep. Washington eventually ordered Whiting to decide which dog or dogs to keep on each farm, then kill all the others. Afterward, "if any negro presumes under any presence whatsoever, to preserve, or bring one into the family. . .," Washington proclaimed, "he shall be severely punished, and the dog hanged." Washington was not the only plantation owner to resort to such drastic measures; Thomas Jefferson, on at least one occasion, ordered the destruction of all dogs belonging to his slaves, while permitting his overseer to retain a pair for his own use. At least one of the condemned dogs was hung as a disciplinary warning to the Monticello slaves.

The ways the slaves at Mount Vernon spent the money they earned was as varied as the individual people themselves, with better clothing, extra food, and household goods among the possibilities. When the Washingtons' cook, Hercules, accompanied them to Philadelphia during the presidency, he made a good deal of money, the equivalent of one hundred to two hundred dollars a year in late-eighteenth-century currency, by selling leftovers from the kitchen. His freedom to sell remnants of food preparation was probably a holdover of a perquisite allowed to cooks and other domestic servants in England, who traditionally sold such items as animal skins, feathers, tallow, and tea leaves to supplement their income. Hercules "lavished the most of these large avails upon dress," according to George Washington Parke Custis. "In making his toilet his linen was of unexceptionable whiteness and quality, then black silk shorts, ditto waistcoat, ditto stockings, shoes highly polished, with large buckles covering a considerable part of the foot, blue cloth coat with velvet collar and bright metal buttons, a long watch-chain dangling from his fob, a cocked-hat, and gold-headed cane completed the grand costume."

Hercules was hardly the only slave at Mount Vernon to spend his money on clothing. In 1786 on an Alexandria street, one of the seamstresses, Charlotte, became embroiled in an altercation with the wife of Charles MacIver over a dress in Charlotte's possession, the same dress that someone else had stolen from Mrs. MacIver two years earlier. Charlotte may have been the last of several slaves to purchase the dress after its theft and its use as an item of barter.

Other individuals spent their money on food, usually in the form of supplies that were better than their usual rations. Slaves purchased from Washington in the last years of his life fine
flour, large quantities of pork, and whiskey. Also, they likely bought imported foods, such as tea, coffee, molasses, and sugar, from shops in Alexandria.

Slaves decorated their cabins with homey items of their own purchase. A typical interior of a slave dwelling at Mount Vernon presented a scene of dire poverty to the Polish visitor Julian Niemciewicz, brightened only by the presence of "some cups and a teapot," which the family living in the cabin could well have bought. Some idea of the kinds of domestic furnishings that African Americans purchased at this period can be found in the legal papers relating to the breakup of the marriage of Nancy Holmes, of the Federal City (later Washington, D.C.), the mother-in-law of a former Mount Vernon slave. Among the objects that her mistress, Eliza Custis Law (Martha Washington's eldest granddaughter), certified that Nancy had acquired "solely by her industry without the least assistance from her husband": "One Desk, 3 tables, 8 chairs, 2 glasses [mirrors], 13 pictures, 2 [cooking] posts, one oven, 2 frying pans, 1 tea kettle, one & a half dozen plates & Six teacups, 3 tea posts, 1 sugar Dish 1 cream pot 1 tea kettle 2 bedsteads 2 beds [mattresses] and bed cloaths 1 pr. Andirons 5 flat irons, 3 tumblers, 3 wine glasses 2 decanters 1 cloths Horse [clotheshorse] a large Wash ketle & 3 tubs." One can imagine the extra time and work that Holmes had put in to earn the money to buy the goods.

In addition to making money, the slaves at Mount Vernon spent their free time just having fun. One favorite activity was visiting with one another at night, after they had finished the day's labor. In 1794 Washington asked manager William Pearce to caution the slaves at the Mansion House Farm of fire, "for it is no uncommon thing for them to be running from one house to another in cold windy nights with sparks of fire flying, and dropping as they go along." He complained that the slaves were too exhausted after what he called "night walking" to do the work expected of them.

Children may have made extended visits to relatives on other farms. In 1786, three young, unattached children lived at Washington's River Farm. Seven-year-old Milly and four-year-old Billy both had mothers, Sall and Charlotte, at the Mansion House Farm, while James, who was eight, was the child of Doll at another farm. These children were too young to be part of the work force, so their absence from home was not a matter of serious concern to the plantation's management, as long as their whereabouts were generally known. It was no doubt a serious concern to their parents.

Many husbands and wives at Mount Vernon endured separation because of their work assignments, spending weekdays on the five different farms. Still others were married to people who lived on plantations belonging to other owners. With Sunday the weekly day off for everyone except possibly house servants, the individuals involved in long-distance marriages could see one another, and their children, only on Saturday night and during the day on Sunday, as well as during other holidays. A master, however, could always curtail such arrangements. In the fall of 1769, Washington became quite annoyed with his neighbor, John Posey, because he had "under very frivolous presences forbid two or three of my People who had Wives in his Family from coming there again," Washington told merchant Hector Ross. In 1793 during the presidency, Washington felt that affairs at Mount Vernon were getting out of control in his absence, so he ordered his farm manager there, Anthony Whiting, to "absolutely forbid the Slaves of others resorting to the Mansion house; such only excepted as have wives or husbands
there, or such as you may particularly license from a knowledge of their being honest and well disposed." Whiting, after giving them a warning, was to punish all others "whenever you shall find them transgressing these orders."

George Washington himself ended the marriage of one of his slaves. In February 1795, he learned that a woman named Fanny at River Farm was "Laid up" for an entire six-day work week because she had been "badly beat" by her husband, Ben, who was owned by a Mr. Fowler. Washington was so incensed that he refused to allow Ben on the plantation and ordered him whipped if he disobeyed. (Within four years Fanny remarried, once again to a slave living off the Mount Vernon estate. This unnamed second husband belonged to a Mr. Alexander.)

The slaves may well have accompanied their visits to friends and loved ones with music, smoking, and storytelling. Archaeologists digging at the site of the original blacksmith shop have found a mouth harp, also known as a Jew's harp, which either a slave or a white servant could have played without special training. The cellar of an excavated slave quarter on the Mansion House Farm has yielded large numbers of clay pipe fragments, which both men and women used for smoking tobacco. A number of the plantation's slaves had been born in Africa, and one of them, the elderly fisherman known as Father Jack, told stories about that far-off and exotic place to young George Washington Parke Custis, who recalled as an adult that Father Jack was an African negro, an hundred years of age, and, although greatly enfeebled in body by such a vast weight of years, his mind possessed uncommon vigor. And he would tell of days long past, of Afric's clime, and of Afric's wars, in which he (of course the son of a king) was made captive, and of the terrible battle in which his royal sire was slain, the village consigned to the flames, and he to the slaveship.

If Jack told such stories to the master's little grandson, he and other slaves surely related similar tales to the children of their own families. In doing so, they passed on cultural values, built pride, and gave the children a historical framework for their lives. All of these things were instrumental in fashioning a community within the quarters, where the first generation of inhabitants had originally come from Africa and from widely differing locales within Virginia.

The slaves at Mount Vernon also found time for games and sports in their free hours. Small African American boys of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made marbles their favorite game, and they may have continued the pastime into adulthood, adding the dimension of gambling to the sport. The cellar of a two-story structure, which housed slave families on the Mansion House Farm for about three decades in the eighteenth century, yielded clay marbles to archaeologists digging in 1984.

Swimming in the Potomac River and the many creeks on the plantation provided some degree of relief from the oppressive heat and humidity of the Virginia summer. In the late summer of 1778, a slave named James provided sad proof of this pastime. After spending the morning ditching the swamp, James (a cooper and one of Washington's "most valuable slaves," according to Lund Washington) and the men with whom he was working stopped for their midday dinner break. He finished eating before the others and went to cool off in the nearby millrace, leaving his breeches on the bank. The mill was not running and there was no current in the race that day, so James, who could not swim and so feared the water that he never went in
farther than waist deep, must have felt comfortable. He did not realize that the millrace was full, and the depth of the water quickly rose to about seven or eight feet, overwhelming the unfortunate man, who quickly drowned. The first person to dive into the water after him almost drowned as well, and it was at least three hours before his fellow slaves recovered James's body.

In 1798 thirty slaves at Mount Vernon, presumably adults, divided into two groups and played a team sport that Niemcewicz, the Polish visitor, described as "prisoner's base," which involved "jumps and gambols as if they had rested all week." Prisoner's base was a traditional English game, dating back to the Middle Ages, which is depicted in contemporary prints and was the subject of at least one song. In the eighteenth century, both children and adults of all classes played it outdoors. It appears to have been a highly athletic, team version of the modern game known as Tag.

George Washington occasionally gave his slaves leave to attend special sporting events. In the fall of 1786, for example, he permitted them to go into Alexandria to attend the horse races, stipulating that so long as responsible individuals remained on each of his farms, the others were free to stagger their attendance over the several-day event. Washington was not the only plantation owner to allow such privileges; slaves belonging to his longtime friend, Dr. David Stuart, went to the races in Alexandria in October 1784. The slaves who accompanied the Washingtons to Philadelphia during the presidency received several opportunities to enjoy the entertainments available in the city. In May 1791, Martha Washington gave Christopher Sheets and Hercules each a ticket to a play. Two years later, Mrs. Washington gave her maids, Oney Judge and Molly, a dollar "to see the tumbling feats," and two months later she funded the women's visit to the circus. They must have liked what they saw there, because less than a month later Hercules and another man, Austin, also received money for the same purpose.

The Washingtons occasionally included the slaves at Mount Vernon in family celebrations as participants, rather than as servants. One of the most memorable of such events was the marriage on 22 February 1799 (George's sixty-seventh and last birthday) of Martha Washington's youngest granddaughter, Eleanor Parke "Nelly" Custis, to George Washington's nephew, Lawrence Lewis. In addition to various members of the extended family, a sizable number of slaves also attended. Martha Washington wore a "light flowered satin" dress and "let all the servants come in to see" the wedding, according to a woman known as Mammy. She described the event nearly sixty years later to the bride's niece, Agnes Lee (who called Mammy "the last but two of the Mt. Vernon servants"). The slaves were more than just spectators, however. Mrs. Washington, or "ole Mistis" as Mammy called her, also provided them with "such good things to eat," probably the special delicacies prepared for the wedding. While it is doubtful that the Washingtons would have or even could have invited all of the slaves from the outlying farms, it is conceivable that they would have included in the festivities the approximately ninety slaves on the Mansion House Farm, with whom the Washingtons were not only physically but likely emotionally close.

Less than a year after Nelly's wedding, the death of George Washington had a tremendous effect on the personal lives of virtually every slave at Mount Vernon. He died on 14 December 1799 after a short illness and on 18 December was buried in the family vault following Episcopalian and Masonic funeral rites. Frank Lee, the family's mulatto butler (and brother of William Lee),
and two of the other serving men from the mansion, Christopher Sheets and Marcus, were outfitted with new shoes the day after Washington's death, probably to look extra-special while waiting on guests attending the funeral. Two other slaves, Wilson Hardiman and Cyrus, took part in the ceremonies, leading Washington's horse, which carried his saddle, holster, and pistols, in the funeral procession from the mansion to the tomb. After the interment, the family offered something to eat and drink to the large number of unrelated visitors who had taken part in the funeral. Afterward, the family distributed to the slaves "remains of the provisions," according to Tobias Lear, Washington's friend and secretary.

Little is known about the spiritual life of the Mount Vernon slaves. Few plantation owners of the eighteenth century took interest in their slaves' religious activities, and no evidence indicates that George and Martha Washington held daily devotional services for their family and servants. In fact, Oney Judge, Martha Washington's maid, who ran away in 1796 and then converted to Christianity, complained that she "never received the least . . . moral instruction, of any kind, while she remained in Washington's family." However, a few clues hint that the Mount Vernon slave community developed spiritual leaders of its own. One man, Will, at Muddy Hole Farm, perhaps was a minister, for George Washington's 1799 census shows the letters "mint'r" written beside Will's name. An enslaved clergyman was not unknown in Virginia at this period, but since there is no other reference to Will in this role, it is impossible to know for sure. However, Caesar, a slave at Union Farm, had a reputation as a well-known preacher among the local African American population in the last years of the eighteenth century. He often wore black and white clothing, perhaps an indication of his ministerial role.

Washington's slaves probably interacted with white members of nearby Baptist, Methodist, and Quaker congregations. In 1797 the Prince Louis-Philippe of France and his servant, Beaudoin, visited Mount Vernon and talked with a number of the slaves, who said that the three religious groups had raised their hopes for freedom in the not-too-distant future. The Quakers had even approached Washington's slaves at places that Louis-Philippe described as "clubs," possibly meetings of mutual-aid or self-help societies, in Alexandria and Georgetown. Throughout Virginia in the last half of the eighteenth century, Baptists and Methodists actively sought new members from the slave community and, whether through their open acceptance of them into the congregation as equals or through their anti-slavery message, received an enthusiastic response, especially from those slaves who were younger and had been born in America. Therefore the presence of Baptists and Methodists among the Mount Vernon slaves is to be expected.

Several tantalizing hints indicate that religious traditions and influences from Africa had survived at Mount Vernon by the end of the eighteenth century. (Such cultural remnants were not unusual; similar evidence has appeared in Virginia at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, in Maryland, and in South Carolina.) African-born slaves generally continued to practice their native religions after their enslavement and transportation to the Americas, with the traditions surviving longest in areas where the population had a high concentration of Africans. Such artifacts from the site of a slave quarter at Mount Vernon as an owl's leg bone, bearing marks from a knife where someone had cut off the talon, and a raccoon baculum (penis bone), incised along one end, might be amulets. A former Maryland slave recalled in the late 1930s that the
"only charms" belonging to slaves on the plantation where he grew up "were made out of bones."

The carving on the bones at Mount Vernon effectively transformed them into ceremonial or decorative objects, which someone could have suspended from a cord around his or her neck. The well-known sexual aggressiveness of male raccoons might have led a slave to see the baculum as a fertility symbol, while the owl's prowess as a nighttime hunter may have caused someone to see its talon as a valuable aid to their own hunting endeavors. Archaeologists suggest that these pieces indicate either cultural borrowing from Native Americans or are New World manifestations of African custom. Whatever the answer, the artifacts certainly suggest the practice of other belief systems beside, or perhaps in conjunction with, Christianity on George Washington's estate. They also lend credence to an undocumented local tradition that the slaves at Dogue Run Farm practiced voodoo or conjuring.

Given the dominant European and Christian culture of the time, it was difficult for African-born slaves to transplant another religion to the Americas completely intact. Using Islam as a cursory example, slaves would have found traditional Friday prayers almost impossible to continue in the New World, with the typical work week in Virginia being Monday through Saturday. Further, given the prominence of pork in slaves' diets, it would have been hard to follow Islamic dietary guidelines; however, the availability of fish, the occasional issue of mutton and beef, and game might have made it possible. Of course, pilgrimage to Mecca was out of the question. Still, other elements of Islamic religious traditions, for example daily prayer and almsgiving, might well have survived the Middle Passage in some form.

The life of Sambo Anderson, the African-born carpenter at Mount Vernon, suggests that some slaves may have based their marriages on a non-European pattern, for it is entirely possible that he had two wives. As of 1799 he was married to Agnes, a thirty-six-year-old woman at River Farm, with whom he had three children, Henky, Cecilia, and Anderson, ranging in age from seventeen to eleven. Also living on River Farm at that time were three other children: Ralph, age nine; Charity, two; and Charles, one. Their mother, Sall, had died not long before. The 1799 census did not, however, name Sall's husband or the children's father. As a free man after Washington's death, Anderson made his home on Little Hunting Creek, near Mount Vernon. However, Washington could not legally free Agnes, her children with Anderson, or Sall's little ones, as they were dower slaves of Martha Washington, and, as such, were eventually divided among Martha's four grandchildren. In the summer of 1810, one of Sall's now-grown sons, Ralph, then about twenty-one, ran away from his owner, Thomas Peter, the husband of Martha Washington's second granddaughter, Martha Custis Peter. Thomas Peter believed Ralph was heading for the home of his father, "a free negro man by name Sambo, living on Judge Washington's estate, Mount Vernon," read the ad in the Alexandria Daily Gazette. That free man was undoubtedly Sambo Anderson.

George Washington might not have recognized his slaves polygynous practices because they were outside the scope of his cultural experiences and expectations. Polygyny was uncommon among Virginia slaves but not completely unknown either. At least one African-born slave on a plantation belonging to Robert "King" Carter, a contemporary of Washington's father, had two wives. Of course, there may be other explanations for Anderson's family situation, perhaps an
extramarital liaison or an adoption, for example. From this distance and with the sources at hand, it is impossible to do more than speculate, but the possibility that Anderson may have been practicing the marriage pattern he knew as a child in Africa is certainly intriguing and cannot be completely dismissed. Either Islam, which permitted up to four wives, or a more traditional African religion, some of which allowed hundreds and even thousands of wives for elite, ruling-class men who could afford them, would have given him both a tradition of, and a clear conscience to practice, polygyny.

The name a mother gave her child also indicates the continuation of an element of Muslim culture. Late in 1800, a year after George Washington's death, Letty, a young mulatto woman who lived at Muddy Hole Farm, gave birth to a little girl she called "Nila." The unusual appellation is the phonetic spelling or an adaptation of a Muslim woman's name, "Naailah," which means "someone who acquires something." In accordance with her late husband's final wishes, Martha Washington at the end of 1800 freed those slaves who had belonged to him, including Letty, her three children (baby Nila and young sons Billy and Henry, or Harry), both her parents, and all her siblings. Maybe Nila was an African name that Letty's family, or her baby's father's family, remembered from Africa. Perhaps Letty simply knew someone named Nila and wanted her daughter to carry the name of her friend. Given the timing of the little girl's birth, however, it is also possible that Letty bestowed the name ("someone who acquires something") in commemoration of her family's newly acquired freedom. If this interpretation is correct, then the larger African American community living in Fairfax County, Alexandria, and at Mount Vernon retained some knowledge of Muslim tradition or some familiarity with the Arabic language. After all, at least one African-born slave, Sambo Anderson, resided in the area well into the nineteenth century, and he as well as others may have kept alive African customs, names, and words.

The lives of the enslaved African Americans who lived and worked at Mount Vernon in the late eighteenth century were fairly typical of the lives of slaves on large plantations throughout Virginia. However, they probably had more freedom over certain aspects of their lives than the average modern visitor to George Washington's home might suspect. In their time off from their rigorous schedule of work in the house and on the farms, the Mount Vernon slaves engaged in tasks that earned small sums of money in order to better their lives. They also enjoyed time with their families and friends, participated in local cultural events, and nurtured their spiritual lives. It may not sound too different from the way people live today. However, George Washington, as the owner of the African American men, women, and children at Mount Vernon and on the outlying farms, could at any time change his mind about allowing a certain liberty. When that happened, there might be no more trips to a social club in Alexandria, a valuable and beloved pet might die, or a marriage might abruptly end without the consent of husband and wife.