Critical Thoughts on Mount Vernon's "Authentic" Past

[Editor's Note: This article focuses on Mount Vernon, but the issues it raises about historical houses, living history sites, and museums applies to many similar sites throughout the country. Encouraging students to visit these sites with a more critical perspective such as the one presented in this article may help them develop not only critical thinking skills but a more thoughtful approach to the study of history and the various ways each generation re-interprets its past.]

History museums are one of many ways that people learn about the past, yet the pasts presented by these and other museums are creations. Tourists to Mount Vernon know that they are not seeing the "real" past, a landscape frozen in time. Regardless, many leave the site believing what they have seen is an objective rendering of the past. Museums are convincing because they serve up "authentic" landscapes that appear accurate and true. The authenticity of the museum's landscape, in turn, gives its particular reading of history greater authority.

What may be less apparent is that the pasts seen are partial and changing. There is no one complete, objective history. Historic sites and history museums stress certain themes or facts over others. Interpretive programs impart specific knowledge during a visit. These interpretive strategies also change over time, as a result of changing conventions in museum practice or as a response to changing social discourse about culture.

In any given year, approximately one million visitors come to Mount Vernon, George Washington's plantation home. For some an act of pilgrimage, for others part of the checklist of must-see sites in Washington, D.C. Visitors come to see the mansion, tour the grounds, and pay their respects at Washington's tomb. The present Mount Vernon estate is situated on 500 acres, only a small part of the approximately 8,000 acres that the Washingtons once held. Following Washington's death in 1799, the estate was kept in the Washington family until 1858. At this time the estate was purchased for $200,000 by a private organization, the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association (hereafter MVLA) (Marling 1988, Wallace 1986). Their purchase of the plantation marks the approximate beginning of the historic preservation movement in the United States (Marling 1988).

The goal of the Association was and is to restore the plantation to its appearance in 1799--to create an authentic, timeless landscape. This idea was explicitly stated as early as 1874 at which time the first Regent of the organization said that, "The mansion and the grounds around it should be religiously guarded from change--should be kept as Washington left them. Upon you rests this duty" (MVLA Annual Report 1988, p. 89).

The Regent's charge embraces a serious problem since the landscape that the MVLA purchased was not the same one that Washington left over a half century earlier. Fire and general decay had already compromised a number of buildings. At the time of its purchase, the mansion was basically empty and parts were at risk of falling down. The Association stabilized the structure and began a process of refurnishing the house with either Washington family objects or appropriate period pieces.

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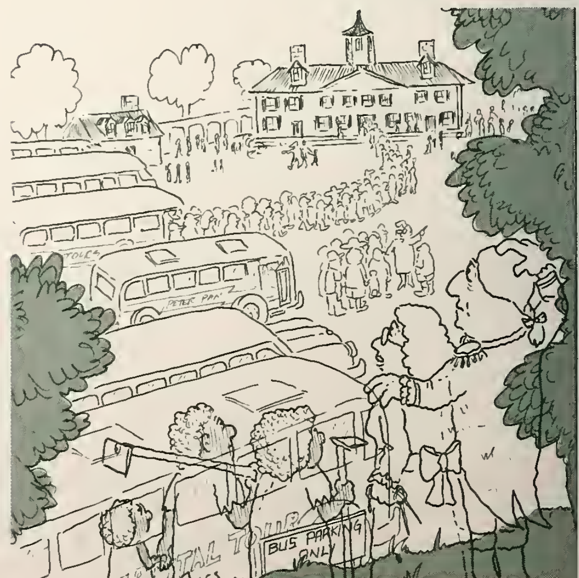

Consequences and Contradictions of Authenticity

In meeting the first Regent's mandate, authenticity, understood as accuracy and truth, undergirds the museum's interpretation of the plantation and is the source of its authority. The term appears over and over in the literature of the Association and is frequently mentioned by interpreters on the house tour. The concept has guided the collections policy of the museum and has been the inspiration for the changes that have taken place both within the house and throughout the grounds.

Despite this, the contemporary landscape is in truth no more a picture of the Mount Vernon of 1799 than the decrepit landscape of the mid-1800's. Regardless of the placement and style of buildings and the historical research that went into filling them, **Mount Vernon remains a contemporary cultural construct**. The history of the cultural landscape at Mount Vernon can be read as the result of the Association's changing vision of what Mount Vernon was.

Authenticity is an important concept and we need to understand it. How is it determined? Who decides what is authentic? Were the Association to embrace a concept of authenticity that dictated the display of only artifacts and buildings that could be attributed to Washington, the effect on the landscape would be tremendous. The mansion would lose about 75% of the furniture. The surrounding outbuildings would be almost entirely empty of objects and modern facilities, and the museum would have to be taken down. Staff would also need to mess up the grounds and trim the trees. Of course, the million plus visitors would have to be excluded.

If absolute veracity is not Mount Vernon's concept of authenticity, what is? Superintendent Charles Wall suggests that "Restoration, like diplomacy, might be described as the art of the possible" (1974:4). Wall means that some aspects of the landscape should receive authentic restoration and some must be compromised, whether it be for lack of funds or information.

The constraints on interpretation, however, go beyond information and money. The museum must take into consideration the number of visitors, the length of the average visit and its own sense of its mission. Although the restoration of the grounds is a readily acknowledged goal of the Association, special significance is and always has been given to the mansion. Wall points out that the mansion dependencies (outbuildings) are just that, dependencies.

The search for the authentic landscape encounters ideological contests as well. The MVLA has shown itself to be very protective of Washington and his image. It is not uncommon to see rumors about the General rebutted in the pages of the annual report (MVLA Annual Reports 1965, 1970). While it is easy for the museum to interpret Washington the hero, statesman, and farmer, it is more difficult to represent Washington the slave owner.

Landscapes and Ideology

All these factors force the MVLA to make choices about how the plantation should look. The interpreted landscape remains a representation of the past, an ideological and negotiated space that promotes a particular vision of Washington. The focus of active interpretation on the estate is the mansion house. The house tour provides the setting in which we learn about farming but not the farm, and the presidency, but only as it relates to events taking place within the mansion. The pre-eminence of the house points to the interpretation of the plantation as a domestic rather than as an economic space. This is an important distinction, since the farm served both as an administrative center for the plantation and also as the Washingtons' home. In its interpretation, the house has been abstracted from its economic context.

Domestic life is stressed, but only in a limited sense. It is the domestic life of the Washingtons' that is of paramount concern, that not of the slaves. And generally, it is the General's domestic life that is of interest. Certainly Martha, her children, and grandchildren are mentioned in the house tour and on some of the signs about the estate, but the focus is undeniably on George.

Along with the favor given the Washington family domestic environment, the

outbuildings are given a lesser status in the literature of the Association and within the landscape itself. Rooms within the mansion are separately described in the tourist's handbook while the outbuildings are described all together under the heading "Plantation Life" (Wall et al. 1985). While the house is interpreted by people, the dependencies are interpreted by signs that talk about the function of the building. The house is depicted and discussed as filled with individuals while the outbuildings were used by anonymous people. Outbuildings are filled with uninterpreted objects that serve as passive reflections of the activities undertaken within them. These buildings stand as mute reminders of the day-to-day tasks of the plantation rather than of the slaves and others who performed them (Ettema 1987, Gibb and Davis 1989, Pearce 1990).

Not surprisingly, the subject of slavery is a sensitive one to the Association. The MVLA erected a monument near the slave burial ground in the 1920's, another in the 1980's, and reconstructed the slave quarter in 1951. Current school guides confront and address the subject, and there is an interest amongst the staff to better interpret slavery. It did, however, take ten years to open and interpret the Greenhouse Quarter, the primary slave quarter, to the public, due more to the fear of controversy than lack of information (Dennis Pogue personal communication). It was not until the early 80's that the Association published a small pamphlet about slavery at Mount Vernon, and only in 1985 did the *Mount Vernon Handbook* use the word slave. The subject is still only slightly, if ever, mentioned in the house tours.

The MVLA's sensitivity to the subject is also visible on the landscape. On the grounds of the plantation, slavery is downplayed. In the Greenhouse Quarter only one quarter of the space is used to depict slave living conditions, with the rest used for storage, the location of a museum shop, and a museum extension. The Museum, which is actually housed in a reconstruction of an early slave quarter, is used entirely as a repository for Washington family relics. The Association's de-emphasis of slavery within the interpreted landscape may be entirely unconscious, but that makes it no less ideological.

Interpretation at Mount Vernon

I am not trying to suggest that Mount Vernon is out of the ordinary nor is it a particularly egregious portrayal of the past. In fact, interpretation at Mount Vernon is similar to that practiced at most history museums and is a model for many. Some may view this as Mount Vernon's appropriate role--to present objective facts, not value judgments. But as Chappell (1989:248) notes, this attitude is "conservativism, not objectivity." It is conservativism because it reflects a belief that objects and facts speak for themselves, without regard to what facts are not presented, and what others might be. Further, the portrayal denies alternative interpretations as biased while never reflecting on its own subjectivity.

The past presented at Mount Vernon is not invalid; rather it is a partial, subjective past. It offers only one reading of history. There are alternatives, for example, to the presentation of women at Mount Vernon that currently focuses on such things as where Martha Washington did her embroidery and where Nelly played the harpsichord for the General. These images of gender at Mount Vernon are not wrong. They are no doubt the result of research. How else might we look at gender?

One could imagine using the house tour or an exhibit to point out how the vision of the Washington family fits nicely with our contemporary gender stereotypes. Or perhaps the image of the family could provide the basis for pointing out the complexity of gender relations on the plantation. The family life of the Washington's and one of the slave families could be contrasted. Martha Washington's role on the plantation could be explored in more depth. She may have spent much of her time engaged in sewing and embroidery, but her dower slaves were the major source of labor for all of the Washington farms (Wall et al. 1985). She owned more slaves than her husband, yet this is never mentioned.

Conclusion

What Mount Vernon needs is to open a dialogue and engage its audience. At present, the mansion tour is passive and

informative, but decidedly not interactive. Rather than presenting authoritative and unquestioned information, interpreters and exhibits should pose questions and offer alternative ways of looking at the past. In this way, visitors including students would be encouraged to use critical thinking skills to evaluate what they are seeing.

Archaeology can play an important role in this change. Excavations are a popular draw at the plantation and interpretation at the archaeological sites provides the visitors contact with researchers. By concentrating research interests in different areas on the plantation, archaeology can shift the weight of interpretation away from the mansion. Since excavations recover artifacts from both before and after 1799, archaeology helps to rehistoricize this ahistoric landscape. Finally, since excavation inevitably leads to the discovery of something previously unknown, archaeology also points out the boundary between what is known and what is not known. Visitors realize that the past is something that is in the process of being made and understood, not something that is finished (Leone, Potter and Shackel 1987).

Museums must recognize the ideologies implicit in their interpretation and exhibitions, and make them explicit. They should do this not simply because it exposes bias, but also because museums play an important role in disseminating visions of history and shaping the public conscience. Since they can no longer hide behind the myth of objectivity and authenticity, museums need to be aware of the social implications of their messages. This need not lead to some form of interpretive anarchy. The point is not to make up stories, but to provide multiple perspectives on the past. Mount Vernon can tell stories about power, gender, and race while remaining true to the historical data and true to Washington. It only has to want to tell these stories.

[An expanded version of this paper was presented at the symposium, "Mount Vernon: Transformation of an 18th-Century Plantation System," Society for Historical Archaeology Annual Meeting, Richmond, Virginia, January, 1991.]

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