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News From Mount Vernon

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News From Mount Vernon,

Submitted by Esther White, Mount Vernon

Mount Vernon will open a new exhibit in July focusing on archaeology and restoration. Highlighting the archaeology section are artifacts from two recently excavated sites: the House for Families slave quarter; and a large kitchen midden associated with the Washington household. The House for Families served as housing for approximately sixty slaves working as house servants and craftspeople. During the 1980s a root cellar filled from 1758-1793 was excavated. Among the artifacts on display from the root cellar are tablewares, buttons, buckles, and a raccoon baculum or penis bone incised at one end.

A deposit of kitchen trash deposited from c. 1760 and 1775 was excavated south of the Mansion. The artifacts recovered from this site are associated with the Washington family and their guests. Toys, sewing implements, a chamber pot, and furniture hardware are among the artifacts displayed.

By comparing the artifacts from these two sites visitors will see how archaeologists draw conclusions about diet and daily life from deposits of trash. An interactive section of the exhibit encourages people to think about the differences in eighteenth- and twentieth-century trash disposal, and that one person's trash is an archaeologist's treasure. A final section illustrates the history of archaeology at Mount Vernon from the 1930s until the 1990s.

Mount Vernon is located 12 miles south of Washington, DC and is open every day of the year.

Slave life at Mount Vernon is the topic of a new tour presented four times a day at the historic house. In 1799, 316 slaves lived and worked the 8,000 acre plantation on the Potomac River. Based on documentary and archaeological information, the 45 minute walking tour focuses on the contributions and daily experiences of African-American individuals and families.

The tour explores several themes including family life, diet, labor and rebellion. These topics are presented through case studies of several Mount Vernon slaves. Hercules cooked gourmet meals for Washington's family, traveling to Philadelphia to work in the presidential household. Although he often earned $200.00 a year selling the slops from the president's kitchen, Hercules ran away, finding none of his privileges equal to the lure of freedom. Charlotte, a strong willed widow is also featured. She threatened to take her complaints against the overseer to the highest level of management, Mrs. Washington.

An abundance of documentary information for the tour has been collected from Washington's writings. Because he was absent from his home for so much of his life, Washington conducted much of the running of Mount Vernon through written correspondence with managers. These letters, diaries, farm reports, and two censuses of the slave population, form what is believed to be the country's most complete historical documentation of slave life.

Archaeological excavations at the House for Families, a quarter housing slaves from c.1758 to 1793, augment the documentary evidence. The artifacts, found in a filled root cellar, provide the...
tour with insights about diet, personal possessions, and leisure pursuits. "Archaeological information tells us the slaves supplemented their daily rations with hunting, fishing, and produce, probably grown in their own gardens. We have incorporated this into the tour so the result is a composite of documentary information with the archaeological findings" says Dennis Pogue, one of the tour coordinators.

The tour is presented four times a day at 10, 12, 2, and 4.