

George Washington Slept Here: From Barbados to Mount Vernon

 gettingontravel.com/george-washington-slept-here-from-barbados-to-mount-vernon/

September 2, 2020



‘George Washington Slept Here’ is the name of a 1942 comedy. But contributor Beth Reiber takes readers to two historic homes where the first president actually stayed that offer visitors a glimpse into this amazing man’s life. Depending on where you live, they may be great road trip destinations.

I’ve always thought that travel, especially when you’re young, can profoundly change your life. Who knows whether I would have become a travel writer if I hadn’t visited Sweden when I was 16 and was introduced to a whole new world?

And so, I surmise that George Washington might have undergone a similar transformation when, at the tender age of 19, he took his first and only voyage abroad to Barbados with his older brother. Although he stayed only two months, his experiences there changed the course of his life. Indeed, it most likely changed the course of America.

If Washington had never gone to Barbados, it's possible he never would have become our first president.

I learned about George's remarkable life at what is now called the George Washington House in Barbados and at Mount Vernon, Washington's home for 45 years. Of course, those aren't the only places he lived. It appears George slept around, at the homes of friends, at encampments during the Revolutionary War, and in New York and Philadelphia when they served as the young nation's capitals. But he never did sleep at his namesake, Washington, D.C. It only became the U.S. capital in 1800, a year after George Washington died.



George Washington House, Barbados

George Washington's youth

George Washington was born in 1732 at Popes Creek Plantation in Virginia. His family was not rich, but they had the means to send George's two older half-brothers to England for a classical, Latin-based education. Young George fully expected to follow in his brothers' footsteps, but when he was 11 years old his father died unexpectedly, limiting the family's financial resources. Instead, George received private tutoring and may have attended a local school, learning the geometry and other skills he needed to become a surveyor.

George started his career as a professional surveyor while still a teenager. By the age of 20, he had completed almost 200 surveys covering more than 60,000 acres. He had the smarts to acquire land in the process, earning himself a tidy fortune. By all indications, he may have continued working as a surveyor for the remainder of his life. But then came the trip to Barbados.



One of some 60 portraits of Washington by Charles Wilson Peale, this one of the general at Yorktown following his greatest victory, now at the National Museum of American History

Barbados: George Washington slept here

After a six-week journey at sea, George arrived in Barbados on November 2, 1751. He came as a companion to his older half-brother, Lawrence, who suffered from tuberculosis and hoped that the warm climate might cure him. George had hardly stepped foot outside Virginia before arriving in bustling Bridgetown, so it's easy to picture him wide-eyed at everything he saw.

Bridgetown was Barbados' largest city and one of the most populous and important towns in British America, home to a military garrison, wealthy sugar-cane planters, an enslaved population, traders, and more. Because the Bridgetown of today is still considered an outstanding example of British colonial architecture from the 17th through 19th centuries, it was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2011.

The brothers rented a house about a mile from Bridgeport, on a hill with great views of ships coming and going in Carlisle Bay. For George, Barbados provided access to a higher class of society than he had enjoyed in Virginia. Invited to social gatherings that included concerts, balls, indoor games, food, and drink, he met judges, merchants, military officers, and

plantation owners. With next to no experience with the military back home, in Barbados Washington grew to appreciate the island's defense system, built to protect one of the most vital and heavily fortified colonies in the British Empire.

Washington's observations proved invaluable when he later led American forces against the British during the Revolutionary War. But just as valuable, it turned out, was Washington's bout with smallpox, one of the most dreaded diseases of the 18th century. Virginia with its mostly rural population had so far been spared the grim epidemic, but it raged in the Caribbean.



George Washington's bedroom in Barbados, where he likely remained for three weeks stricken with smallpox.

Extremely virulent, smallpox spreads through contact, causing fever, severe headaches, body aches, vomiting, rash and pustules. How different American history might have been if Washington had not survived. Instead, it gave him lifetime immunity, allowing him to lead soldiers despite a smallpox pandemic during the Revolutionary War and to become one of our country's greatest leaders.

The health of brother Lawrence, however, did not improve. He decided to convalesce in Bermuda, while George sailed back to Virginia at the end of December 1751. Lawrence died in Virginia in 1752.

The George Washington House

A handsome Georgian-style residence built in 1717, the house George and his brother rented has seen many changes over the ensuing centuries, including the addition of a front veranda and a second floor. Yet it retains its original footprint and is furnished with items from Barbados plantations and the Barbados National Trust, as well as with reproductions crafted by local artisans and brought from Colonial Williamsburg.

The ground floor contains a large entrance hall, used as the main parlor and flanked on both sides with the two bedrooms used by the brothers. The second floor contains five exhibition rooms, with information on the brothers' stay in Barbados (including passages from George's journal), Barbados plantations and slavery, and more.

On the compound's grounds are a windmill for pumping water, a bathhouse, stables (now serving as a café), a detached kitchen to protect the house from fire and heat, and a network of 200-year-old underground tunnels, which were built for drainage but may also have served as escape routes for garrison troops if necessary. A cinema shows a 20-minute docu-drama about George Washington's stay in Barbados.

To learn even more about George, I also signed up for the Dinner with George experience. Served at a long table with only candles for lighting just like in the days of yore, the meal was similar to what George might have eaten in 1751, including dolphin and yam pie with plantains, pineapple to clean the palate (the exotic fruit was George's favorite among the many he ate in Barbados), and lamb stew. Dessert was a rumbullioned bread and butter pudding (the process of producing rumbullion, today known as rum, was invented on Barbados more than 300 years ago). Rounding out the evening was a George Washington impersonator imparting interesting stories about his life, as well as a cellist and violinist serenading with period music. Nature chimed in with atmospheric rain, thunder and lightning.

Mount Vernon: George Washington Slept here, too



Mount Vernon commands a sweeping view over the Potomac River

George Washington inherited Mount Vernon after his brother Lawrence died. Built by their father in 1734 and named by Lawrence after a famous British admiral, the estate was George's home from 1754 until his death in 1799. The grand residence occupies an enviable spot, with a sweeping view above the Potomac River and surrounded by all the industries and outbuildings of a successful enterprise. If you ask me, Mount Vernon was the love of George Washington's life, along, of course, with Martha, whom he married in 1759.

Yet despite his unwavering love, Washington wasn't able to live in Mount Vernon all of those 45 years. After his return from Barbados, more interested in the military than surveying and despite having no prior military experience, Washington played pivotal roles during the French and Indian War (1754–1763) and the Seven Years' War (1756–1763). Like many of his fellow countrymen, he also grew increasingly frustrated by the disparities between British and American pay and status and was opposed to regulations imposed by the British, including unjust taxation.

In 1775, Washington was elected Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, despite having no experience commanding a large conventional army. Yet he was able to bring together Americans from thirteen states and beat Britain's superior military force. His immunity from smallpox proved fortuitous when the disease, introduced by British soldiers

and recruits joining the Continental Army, ravaged his troops but left the general unaffected. Washington ordered the inoculation of his entire army, a move that reversed the dwindling of his troops due to smallpox and probably helped win the war.

The American Revolution grinded through six grueling years, during which General Washington was able to stop by Mount Vernon only once. To her credit, Martha spent about half of those years with him instead, at each of his winter encampments (apparently, battles took a breather during the harsh winter months).

By the time the Revolutionary War ended in 1781 with the Battle of Yorktown, Washington had become a national hero. But he bowed out of public life, hoping to remain at his beloved Mount Vernon for the rest of his life.

Fate, however, would decide otherwise. In 1787, Washington traveled to Philadelphia to become presiding officer of the Constitutional Convention that would frame the new Constitution. After the Constitution was ratified, the Electoral College voted unanimously to elect George Washington as president. In fact, he remains the only president to have been unanimously elected by the Electoral College—twice. He served two terms as president, from 1789 to 1797.

But even when military and presidential duties kept him away, George Washington always took a keen, passionate interest in almost every aspect of Mount Vernon.

He proved to be an innovative farmer, experimenting with new crops (he switched from tobacco to wheat as his main crop in the 1760s), crop rotation, and livestock breeding.

His estate, which in 1754 consisted of 3,000 acres and a 3,500-square-foot home, grew to about 7,600 acres and an 11,000-square-foot, 21-room mansion by the time of his death. Washington oversaw each renovation of his home, including the additions of a third floor, wings on both ends, and a piazza overlooking the Potomac. His plantation included a flour mill, a successful fishery (in 1772 alone, the Potomac yielded 1.3 million herring and more than 11,000 shad) and one of the largest distilleries in America.

Visiting Mount Vernon



Mount Vernon's recreation of Washington's inauguration

Yet, one of America's most iconic mansions of the 18th century might have disappeared from history if not for the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, which raised \$200,000 to purchase the home and 200 acres in 1858. Even today, the association maintains Mount Vernon and receives no government funding.

There's much to see and do on a visit to Mount Vernon. The best place to start is the Museum and Education Center, which traces George Washington's life with galleries, theaters, artifacts from his lifetime, and special exhibits. The most important thing to see, however, is the mansion itself, which you can see only on a guided tour. It's furnished and decorated as it might have looked in 1799, the year Washington died, with about 40% original furnishings plus period pieces and reproductions.

The grandest room is the New Room, the last addition to the mansion with a ceiling two stories high. The Washingtons received many visitors (as many as 677 overnight guests in 1798), and there are nine guestrooms in the house. You can see the bedchamber where the Washington couple slept and which Martha used for such personal activities as writing letters and reading the Bible. This is also where George died, of a severe throat infection at the age of 67.

My favorite room is Washington's study, located directly underneath the couple's bedchamber. Washington was an early riser, getting up every morning between 4 and 5am, and descending via a private staircase to his study where he bathed and kept his clothes. This is where he managed his estate, and reportedly no one was allowed in without an invitation. I especially like the fan chair, operated by a treadle below the sitter's feet.

There are many other places on the estate to visit, including gardens, a greenhouse, slave quarters, a blacksmith shop, a spinning house, a detached kitchen, the Necessary (outhouse), smokehouse, wash house, stable, and a replica of the 16-sided barn Washington designed for treading wheat. There's also a fully-functioning gristmill, a faithfully reconstructed working distillery which produces small batch spirits, and the four-acre Pioneer Farm, where costumed interpreters demonstrate Washington's innovative farming and fishing practices.

George and Martha are buried at Mount Vernon, in the Washington Tomb.



Reflections on why George Washington was one of our greatest presidents

There are many experiences in addition to travel that can shape a young person. Perhaps in George's case, one of the activities that had a lasting impression happened when he was around 14 years old, when he wrote out all 110 maxims outlined in Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation. Many of the rules, about how to show consideration and respect toward others by paying attention to body language, speech, and dress, seem self-evident. On the other hand, perhaps the Rules of Civility should be required reading of all our presidents. Here are some of my favorites:

Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present.

In visiting the Sick, do not Presently play the Physician if you be not Knowing therein.

Be not hasty to beleive flying Reports to the Disparag[e]ment of any.

Associate yourself with Men of Good Quality if you Esteem your own Reputation; for 'tis better to be alone than in bad Company.

Let your Conversation be without Malice or Envy, for 'tis a Sig[n o]f a Tractable and Commendable Nature: And in all Causes of Passion [ad]mit Reason to Govern.

Labour to keep alive in your Breast that Little Spark of Ce[les]tial fire called Conscience.

I also can't help being impressed by how much Washington learned through sheer will and desire. Unlike his peers of the time and presidential successors, such as John Adams (educated at Harvard and knowledgeable in Greek, Latin and French) and Thomas Jefferson (educated at the College of William and Mary and knowledgeable in Greek, Latin, Anglo-Saxon, French and Italian), Washington was largely self-taught but a lifelong learner.

And when he died, he was one of the richest men in America. By purchasing parcels of land as a young surveyor and continuing to buy land throughout his life, he owned nearly 51,000 acres spread throughout much of the young country. He also must have cut something of a handsome figure in his younger years, standing more than six feet tall. A friend wrote in 1760 that Washington had well-developed muscles indicating great strength, blue gray penetrating eyes, dark hair he wore in a braid, graceful movements and a majestic walk. He was also a splendid horseman.

Of course, George Washington was by no means perfect, slavery being a case in point. Inheriting 10 slaves upon the death of his father when he was 11 years old, Washington was a major slaveholder throughout his life. Treatment of his slaves at Mount Vernon was

sometimes harsh, and as president he signed the horrific Fugitive Slave Act into law that granted the right to capture runaway slaves even if they reached free states and territories.

It was only in his 1799 will that Washington declared his slaves should be set free after Martha's death. She did so in 1801, dying a year later. Critics contend emancipation should have come while Washington was still alive. But he was the only Founding Father to set his enslaved people free in his will. And this was Virginia where by 1860, slaves constituted one third of the state's population.

On reflection, I think it's what George Washington didn't do that's almost as important as what he did.

After the Revolutionary War, when he was idolized as a national hero, he could have seized power, just like numerous military leaders around the world and throughout history have done following a revolution. But Washington, who firmly believed that power should rest in the hands of civilians rather than the military, decided it best if he returned home.

Furthermore, because Washington was our first president, he set precedence with a host of measures that have survived the test of time, including the creation of a cabinet to serve as advisors. Under a lesser man with a bigger ego, who knows how the president's role in our government may have evolved?

Robert Frost said it best, in this tribute I saw inscribed at Mount Vernon:

George Washington was one of the few men in all of human history who was not carried away by power.

We were lucky to have him.

What's appealing to the over-50 luxury traveler?

While you can learn a lot about George Washington at Barbados' George Washington House and Mount Vernon, you'll also learn about life in the 18th century, including architecture, cuisine, livelihoods, events that shaped history, and inequalities caused by slavery.

Although you can wander around Mount Vernon's extensive estate on your own, admittance to Washington's mansion is only on guided tours with timed entries. You can avoid standing in line and save time by purchasing your ticket online.

Mount Vernon has a food court for visitors on the go, but for more relaxed dining there's The Inn Restaurant, just steps from Washington's estate and with indoor and outdoor seating. To get into the spirit of the times, sample Washington's whiskey, distilled even today in a working reconstruction of his distillery.

Take note

There's no need to worry about communicating in Barbados, as English is the official language.

Mount Vernon's grounds are immense, so wear good walking shoes and plan accordingly. You'll need a minimum of three hours, more if you want to see everything.

Check websites for updates on closures due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Disclosure: *The author visited Barbados as part of a travel writers' conference but explored Washington, D.C., on her own*

All photo credits: Beth Reiber

IF YOU GO

George Washington House

George Washington's Mount Vernon

Save to Pinterest!



George Washington Slept Here:
From Barbados to Mount Vernon

