

Traveling with Tots

By LIBBY CARTY MCNAMEE



A day at Mount Vernon: Discover the real George Washington

The 22nd day of February is one to celebrate with gusto. It's the birthday of one of our most dynamic and beloved forefathers. This year, George Washington is turning 280. Now that's a lot of candles to blow out!

Seriously, without his bravery and steadfast leadership, America might not be the country we know today. He served eight long years without pay as General Washington, the ragtag Continental Army's commander-in-chief. Defying overwhelming odds, he honorably led his men in conquering Britain, the world's greatest military power.

Despite his desire to return home to Mount Vernon, he was unanimously elected our first president and then re-elected. In refusing to be made king, he assumed only the humble title of "Mr. President," which is still used today. He is remembered as "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

It's little wonder he is known as the "Father of Our Country" with Mount Vernon as "America's First Home."

Despite his many years away dedicated to his country, Mount Vernon remained his favorite place. He declared, "No estate in United America is more pleasantly situated than this." In addition to being an innovative farmer, he was also quite an entrepreneur, developing fisheries, a gristmill, and the largest whiskey distillery in the country.

George and Martha Washington had an open door policy with visitors, welcoming anyone, even strangers. In the first year after the

presidency, they entertained more than 600 dinner guests. Back then it was considered rude to ask guests the duration of their stay. That sure is some fine Southern hospitality!

In that same tradition, Mount Vernon remains open 365 days a year. Admission is free on Feb. 20, but the crowds are huge. When making plans, please keep in mind that Mount Vernon averages one million visitors each year. Spring is gorgeous there, but it also draws peak crowds from March 15 until May 31. Due to lower visitation, February is a great time to visit if you bundle up. If visiting on a weekday, try to arrive after 11 a.m. between school field trips. It's also best to go on a sunny day since many of the kid-friendly activities are outside.

Visitors are admitted on a first-come, first-served basis, so planning your arrival time is crucial. Your designated time to tour the mansion will be printed on your admission ticket. Children 5 and under are free, and parking is free as well. There is a separate fee for visiting the distillery and gristmill down the road, open April through October.

An excellent option is to buy

your tickets online. That way you can select your own tour time. If you email ahead, you can even volunteer to hoist the flag when the estate opens at 9 a.m.

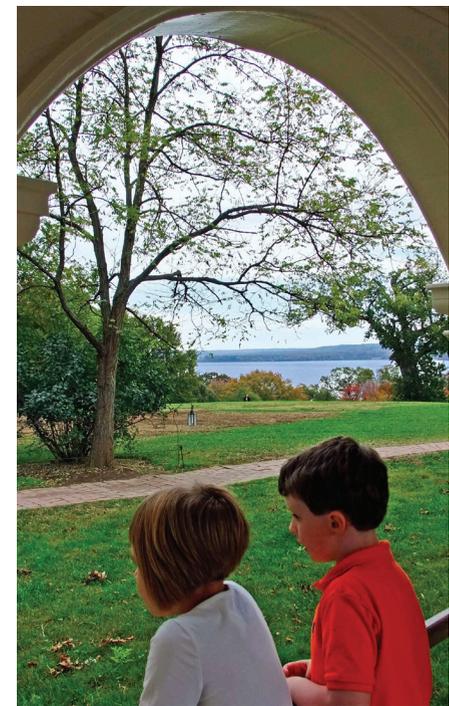
As you enter the Ford Orientation Center, you'll come upon "Mount Vernon in Miniature" which is an incredibly detailed replica of the mansion. Even if your kids don't like dollhouses, this will still be huge hit. This exquisite mini-mansion even has revolving walls and roof. There is also an 18-minute adventure movie "We Fight to Be Free" showing General Washington's daring exploits as a young soldier. Please be advised this may be too violent for younger children.

The Donald W. Reynolds Museum & Education Center offers many interactive exhibits for kids. In addition, it also offers "Hands-on-History" for younger kids from ages 3 to 8. Young historians dress up in 18th-century clothing, play in a real Mount Vernon dollhouse, read books, and learn about the farm animals.

Once you're outside, the Adventure Map is a great way to get kids excited to explore the farm. As they locate each of the nine "puzzle places" at Mount Vernon, they'll find



There is plenty for children to explore on the grounds of Mount Vernon. Photos by Loretta Sherwood.



clues to help solve the final puzzle - for a prize! You can also walk down the steps to the wharf and hike the quarter-mile Forest Trail through woods of oak, laurel, and holly trees. Make sure to visit Washington's Tomb as well as the Slave Memorial, blacksmith shop, and farm animals.

A new exhibition will open on Feb. 18 called "Hoecakes to Hospitality: Cooking With Martha Washington." More than 125 objects from the Washingtons' kitchen will be on display, including the family dinner bell. There will also be demonstrations that weekend on how to prepare George's favorite "hoecakes."

Although food is not allowed on the grounds, there is a modern food court and the kid-friendly Mount Vernon Inn restaurant, both with a variety of options. Do not miss out on the lovely gift shops. There is a cornucopia of interesting Colonial memorabilia, high-quality kids' toys, and beautiful reproductions.

Back home, kids may enjoy a virtual visit to George Washington's world at www.washingtonsworld.org. Play an archaeology memory game, work on jigsaw puzzles, or download some free 3D games such as Bombarding Yorktown, Harpsicord Hero, and Washington's Treasures.

Ah, Mount Vernon. There's no place like home! **RPM**

Libby Carty McNamee, a local freelance writer and mother, encourages you to visit America's First Home and walk in the footsteps of the Father of Our Country. For more information, please refer to www.mountvernon.org or head due north about 100 miles.