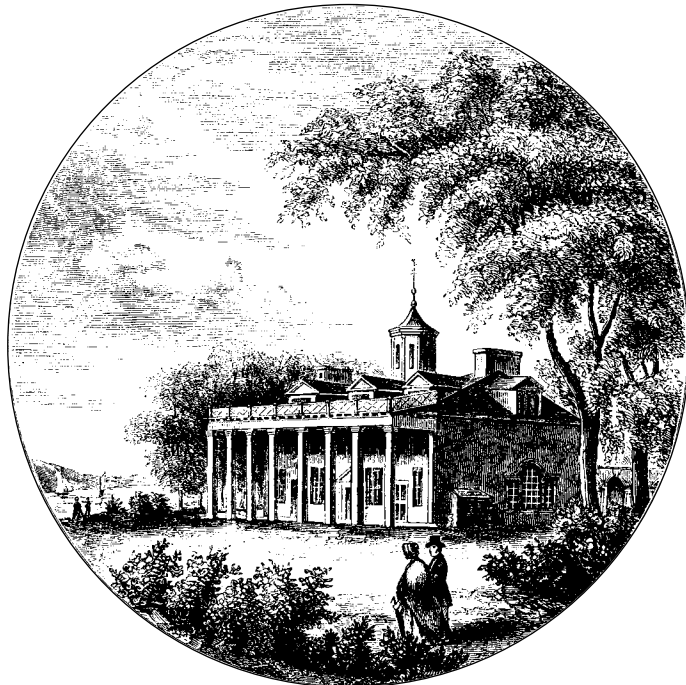


# New Vision and Facilities Transform Washington's Mount Vernon Estate

By Alan E. Reed, AIA, LEED AP

A campaign to rejuvenate George Washington's reputation and expand and revitalize facilities at George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens was the focus of grand "reopening" to the public in the fall of 2006. The culmination of a decade of visioning, planning, designing, and building will give Mount Vernon's million plus annual visitors a better understanding of the real George Washington.

Situated on 500 rolling acres overlooking the Potomac River, George Washington's estate has been owned by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association since 1858. A private organization that has never received public funds, this association has focused



*Vintage view of George Washington's Fairfax County Estate, Mount Vernon from the nineteenth century.*



ALL PHOTOS THIS ARTICLE EXCEPT POST CARD/ GWWO ARCHITECTS

*The author is the president and design principal of the architectural firm that has worked with Mount Vernon since 1995 on the master plan and subsequent implementation of projects.*

since its founding on the preservation, restoration and management of the estate. A series of studies and subsequent alarming contents led to the expansion of the Mount Vernon mission in 1995. "Our eyes were opened to just how little today's visitors and students know about George Washington," said James C. Rees, executive director of Mount Vernon.

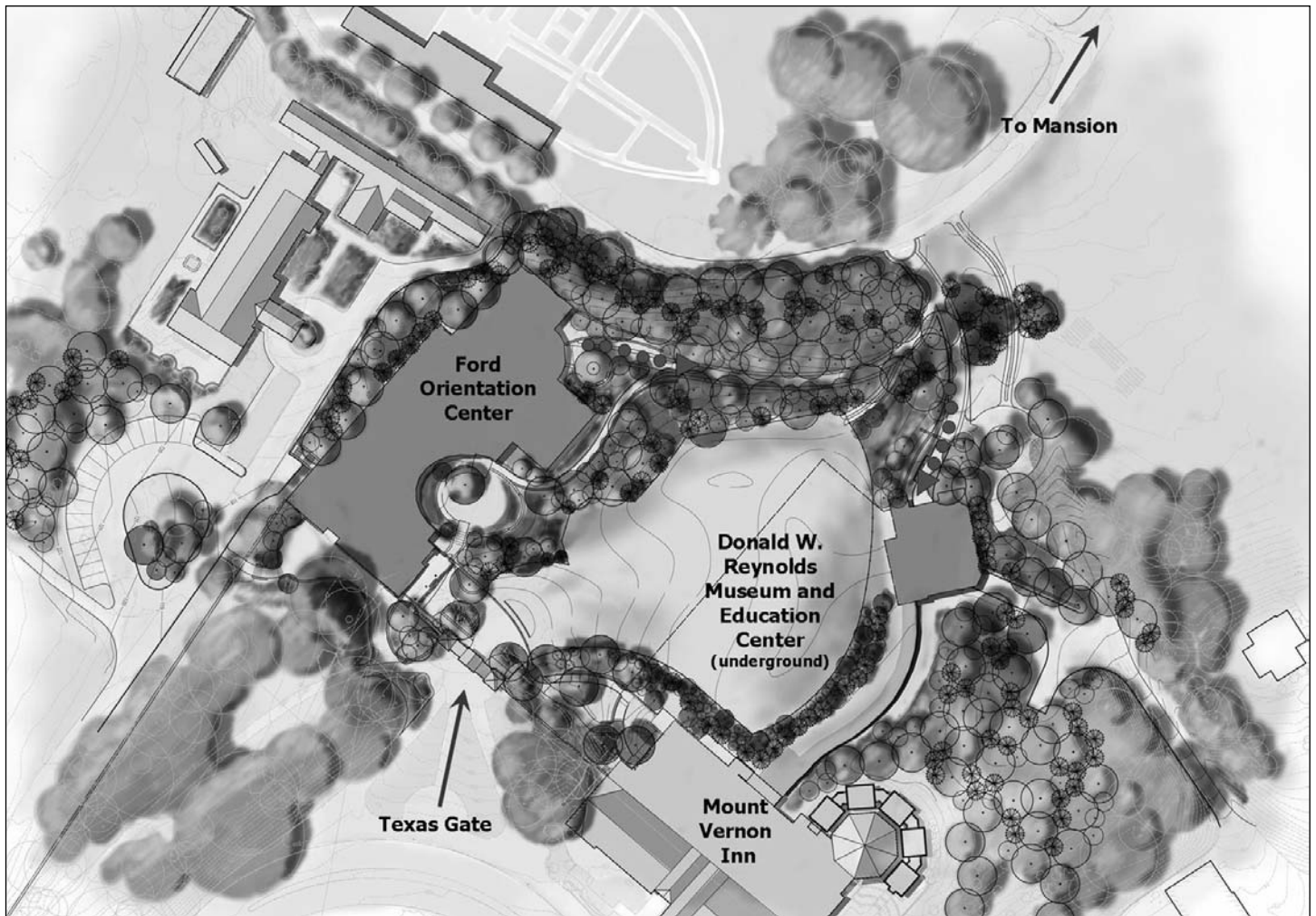
## WASHINGTON WANING?

One study by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni found that only 42 percent of students at 55 leading universities could name Washington as the man who was called "first in war, first in peace and first in the hearts of his coun-

trymen."\* Ninety eight percent of these students could, however, identify rapper Snoop Doggy Dogg and cartoon characters Beavis and Butt-Head.

"Today's public sees Washington as old and stiff, and though I can't imagine it, boring," said Jim Rees. "They are unaware that Washington was a frontier surveyor who fought Indians, a leader who molded a band of farmers into the army that secured American independence, and a statesman who united 13 hesitant colonies into the union that is today one of the world's leading nations."

But this will soon change. Today, the mission of the association, that was expanded in mid 1995, includes as part of its focus the education of



“visitors and people throughout the world about the life and legacies of George Washington, so that his example of character and leadership will continue to inform and inspire future generations.” Gone will be image of the stodgy old man on the dollar bill.

## PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Recognizing that achievement of their vision would require significant changes in operations, facilities and educational outreach, the Association undertook a comprehensive planning process in the mid 1990s.

It was clear that to tell George Washington’s story on the estate, additional facilities would be needed. It was no longer sufficient for visitors to simply visit the place where George Washington walked, ate and slept; this did not begin to tell the amazing story of Washington’s life and achievements. The challenge was to decide what facilities were needed, how big they needed to be, what they should contain, and where they would

go on the estate. Furthermore, how would the new construction be integrated in a way that respected the historic setting, while creating a compelling and educational visitor experience?

## TEAM ASSEMBLED

To assist them in answering these questions and exploring opportunities, the Mount Vernon Ladies Association undertook a nationwide search to select a team of architects, land planners and specialty consultants to work with them to visualize the estate’s future. Begun in 1995, the master planning process explored these many questions and identified the physical facilities and estate improvements necessary to bring this expanded message to visitors, while maintaining the pastoral setting and overall estate experience.

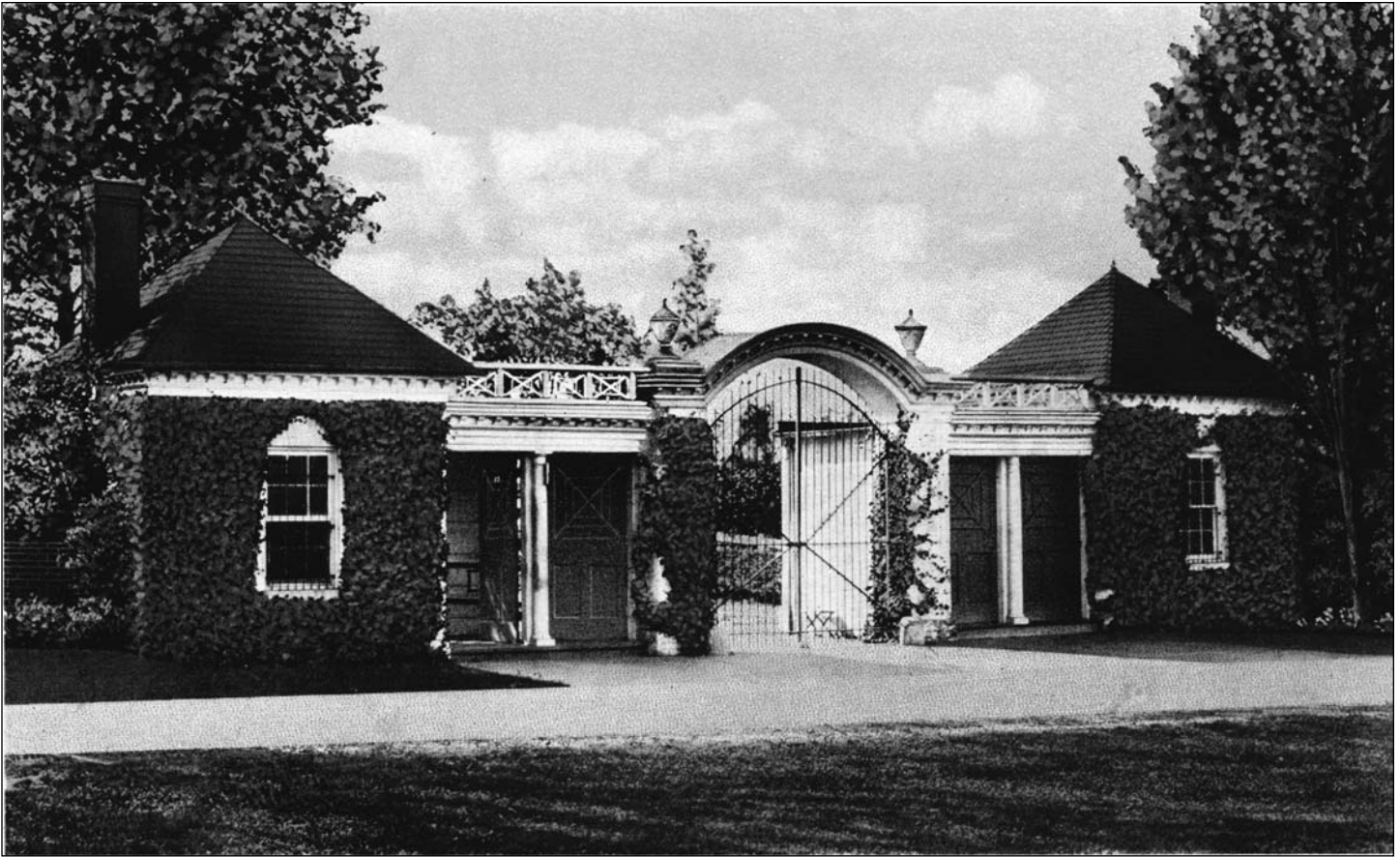
The resultant master plan called for three significant capital projects—the renovation and expansion of the Mount Vernon Inn, a new orientation center, and a new museum and edu-

cation center—as well as significant site improvements to enhance visitor flow and integrate the new facilities within the estate.

The first of these projects—the renovation and expansion of the Mount Vernon Inn to enhance and expand food service and retail operations—was completed in 2001. After completion of this first phase, but before moving forward, Mount Vernon and the design team revisited the plan. Following this update of the master plan, the decision was made to undertake the next two phases of the plan simultaneously.

## FUNDRAISING

Studies continued to show declines in the American public’s knowledge of George Washington and the need was pressing. Thus the “To Keep Him First” campaign was born. The most ambitious single financial undertaking in the 151 year history of the Association, the campaign initially sought \$85 million for the construction of the two new facilities, creation



*The view many of you might remember as children entering the Texas Gate to Mount Vernon has changed little since the era of this vintage post card. Do you remember what you first saw when entering the gate? Look now at the landscape to the right that will greet you as you enter the estate.*

of an endowment and implementation of a nationwide outreach effort to every school in America. To date the campaign has raised more than \$100 million, led by significant donations by Ford Motor Company Fund, the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation and Virginia philanthropists Robert and Clarice Smith.

## DESIGN FOR HALLOWED GROUND

In developing a design approach for the new orientation center and new museum and education center, the design team and Mount Vernon talked extensively about what was appropriate within the context of George Washington's estate. New construction within his hallowed ground—a site that was envisioned and created by our nation's father himself—was not to be undertaken lightly.

It was quickly apparent that the success of the project would hinge on creating facilities that would allow for new and exciting experiences at Mount Vernon without detracting from or diminishing the experience

of viewing and touring Washington's mansion and grounds. To this end, the design process was guided by three key objectives: to minimize impact on the historic estate; to optimize visitor flow and enable the visitor to intuitively find their way through the estate; and to create buildings that reflect today's culture yet evoke the spirit of George Washington.

In exploring options related to the key challenge of how to add the significant amount of desired new construction while maintaining the character and quality of the historic setting, the conclusion was reached that two buildings, with one largely built underground, were the best solution. This enables the blending of the new facilities seamlessly into the site without impacting view sheds and without detracting from or overwhelming the mansion.

## VISITOR SEQUENCE

The decision to structure the visitor path with orientation center first, mansion, estate and grounds second,

and museum and education center third was also critical. It was agreed that this sequence would provide the best possible visitor experience, while maintaining flexibility. Visitors are immediately provided with all of the information they need to fully experience the estate and to make informed choices about the day's activities. Following their tour of the mansion and grounds, visitors are then provided with opportunities to learn more and to deepen their understanding of what they have seen and experienced. In addition, the education center was also envisioned as a stand alone destination, where visitors could go separate from the Estate to pursue specific research and/or learning opportunities related to George Washington's service and contributions to the country.

Finally, it was essential that the new facilities and site improvements graciously accommodate Mount Vernon's visitors and significantly enhance their experience. Building and landscape design are carefully integrated to optimize visitor flow and create a natural travel sequence

through the estate. Finding your way is intuitive. Visitors set their own pace and their focus is on the beauty of the estate and the George Washington experience, not on reading signs, worrying which path to take, or endlessly consulting their map.

## INSPIRED, BY GEORGE

To implement the design and achieve the project's vision, the design team looked to the estate's context—to the history and spirit of the place and to George Washington himself.

Owned by the Washington family for seven generations—from 1674 when King Charles II granted the land to John Washington—Mount Vernon was the place that George Washington called home. He spent five years of his childhood and several of his teenage years on the estate before inheriting the land after the early death of his older half brother Lawrence Washington.

In 1759, after military service and at the age of 27, he settled at Mount Vernon with his new bride and two stepchildren and began the expansion of Mount Vernon and accumulation

of additional land upon which he built his prosperous farming operation. Whenever public duty did not draw him away, Washington could be found at Mount Vernon. He was quoted as saying "I can truly say I had rather be at home at Mount Vernon with a friend or two about me, than to be attended at the seat of government by the officers of State and the representatives of every power of Europe."

Washington's love for his home and the surrounding land is visible in its every detail. This affection has always been central in the minds of the association as they have restored and managed the estate. And it was central in the minds of the design team as they approached the creation of the new buildings, which represent the largest amount of new construction on the estate since the construction of the mansion itself.

## INTERPRETING WASHINGTON

It was clear to the team that the new facilities must be of their own time; they could not mimic or compete with the mansion, but must invoke the spirit of the man. The intention was to create facilities

that would be respectful and evocative of the unique design creativity of George Washington, as well as appropriate within the historic estate context. As George Washington was so inventive and deliberate in the techniques he used throughout the estate, the team was able to draw on these and interpret them in a modern way. The question of what Washington would do on his land, if he had all of the options available to designers today, was repeatedly posed.

Overall, the design of the new facilities and landscape metaphorically interprets the experience that visitors in Washington's time had as they entered the estate and approached the mansion by using Washington's "pastoral, yet controlled" approach to visitor flow. George Washington sculpted the visitor's path through the estate by creating specific views that oriented them and built anticipation for their ultimate destination—the mansion. This approach was unique because visitors experienced the estate's beauty and pastoral qualities without sensing the methods used to control their path.

A similar approach is used in the new visitor path, created as part of



*Here is the pasture view that now greets you as you enter through the old Texas Gate. The Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center lies beneath this.*





*An exterior shot of the Ford Orientation Center.*

this project. Through a series of carefully composed landscape settings and perspectives, the visitor is introduced to, oriented and guided toward the historic grounds of the estate. Entry is through the historic Texas Gate, where the eye is immediately drawn across a bucolic pasture to a view that hints at the enormity and beauty of the estate. Similar views are created as they proceed through the orientation center and out onto a woodland path that leads up to the mansion. Visitors merge onto the historic North Lane at the same point that visitors did in Washington's time and proceed through the Bowling Green gate to the mansion.

### 18TH CENTURY TECHNIQUES

Many other specific techniques that were used by and/or known to George Washington were also used in the design. One key technique is the use of ha-ha walls (also known as a "sunk fence"), that Washington

used to separate garden places from pastures and estate operations, and to create hidden means of dealing with drainage. These are incorporated at various points, and the museum and education center building itself forms a large ha-ha wall at the edge of the pasture that is its roof. Other techniques include the incorporation of boundary walls and garden walls with unique brick patterns, use of espalier to enhance the garden setting, the development of highly controlled vistas, modeling of the ground plane for visual and aesthetic effect, and planting design for aesthetics and functional purposes.

The result of this approach is facilities that, despite their significant size, have minimal impact on the historic estate and are in the spirit of George Washington. The visitors' understanding of his pastoral and historical setting, and view sheds to and from the historic grounds, are actually enhanced by the new construction. Through the use of underground

construction and careful integration of architectural and landscape design, visitors to the estate continue to experience the site much as George Washington did more than 200 years ago. This is perhaps the project's most significant achievement, and hopefully would meet with General Washington's approval.

### ORIENTATION CENTER

With a comprehensive movie and orientation exhibitions, the Ford Orientation Center gives visitors an overview of the Mount Vernon experience while dispelling the elder statesman icon and introducing the real George Washington—a dynamic, fascinating hero—prior to touring the estate. Made possible by Ford Motor Company Fund, "the center will be a vital resource which will be the gateway for generations of young Americans to learn about George Washington," said Jim Rees.

## ACTION FILM

A highlight of the center is a dramatic, 18 minute movie featuring an action oriented reenactment of the defining moment of the Revolutionary War—Washington crossing the Delaware River. Filmed partially at Mount Vernon, the large format film serves as an important vehicle for visitors as they transition from the present day to the 18th century. It is presented in rotation in two adjacent state of the art theaters with total seating for 450.

## RAISING EXPECTATIONS

Design of the center plays an important role in raising visitor expectations. The lobby features an elliptical floor to ceiling wall of glass that embraces a “clearing” with picturesque views to the pasture beyond. As visitors become oriented and introduced to the many activities available on the estate, the light filled space gives them a continuous visual connection to the site. What visitors are not yet aware of is that the Donald W. Rey-

nolds Museum and Education Center lies under the gentle upslope view they see.

The interior of the center reveals itself to visitors as they experience it. With the space organized around the clearing, visitors are afforded an intimate experience and do not perceive the true volume of the building. By breaking the orientation center into a series of manageable spaces, the design enables it to graciously handle large crowds in peak times, without feeling cavernous to visitors during the off season.

The physical expression of the center is of today, yet respectful and evocative of George Washington and appropriate within the historic estate context. Except where the orientation center’s north exterior wall integrates with the estate’s previously existing brick boundary wall, a new brick pattern—which represents a blend of various historic examples found throughout the estate—is used for the new brick construction. The intricacies of the brick detail, as well as the use of an elliptical clearing and a modern version of espalier, fore-

shadow the upcoming estate experience.

## MUSEUM & EDUCATION CENTER

The Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center features 23 gallery and theater experiences that illuminate the detailed story of Washington’s life, including his military and presidential careers, which cannot be covered in depth by the usual tour of his estate.

According to Jim Rees, the museum and education center “will introduce visitors to the real George Washington through the fascinating details of his life.” Museum galleries, that will feature over 400 objects, will offer a refreshing and insightful look into the taste, style, and personalities of the Washingtons through artifacts most closely associated with life at Mount Vernon, the Revolutionary War, and his presidency.

## HIGH TECH DISPLAYS

In the education center, visitors will be captivated through the use of com-



*Sculptural representations of George, Martha, and one of their grandchildren (r) greet visitors to the Ford Orientation Center.*

puter imaging, LED map displays, dynamic graphics, surround-sound audio programs, “immersion” videos, illusionist lighting effects, dramatic staging, and touch screen computer monitors. The engaging, state of the art displays will tell Washington’s entire life story, from the childhood adversities he overcame, through his adventures in the new American frontier, to his heroic leadership that brought victory to the Continental Army, and his precedent setting role as first president.

In the “Young Virginian,” “Upstart Colonial Officer,” and “First in War” galleries, visitors will see three accurate life sized models of Washington and in the state of the art “Revolutionary War Theater,” they will feel like they were present with him at the battles of Boston, Trenton, and Yorktown as snow falls, fog dissipates and their seats rumble.

## GOING UNDERGROUND

A key challenge in the design of the Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center arose from the decision to build the majority of the facility underground. It was imperative that visitors never feel as if they are descending into a “basement.” Visitors enter a light filled lobby on the mezzanine level of an entry pavilion. Careful utilization of windows, light and views prevents the feeling of going underground as the visitor

descends a grand stair. At all times during this transition, a visual connection to nature and the estate is maintained and the path through the building is clear.

A glass enclosed serpentine corridor runs the length of the building and evokes a “walk in the woods” similar to the exit from the orientation center. As visitors follow the path, they “emerge” from the 18th century experience to the present day as the Mount Vernon Inn, not previously visible during their journey, comes into view. The corridor guides them to exit through the Inn, with its dining and retail opportunities.


Scholars, historians and others seeking access to only the classrooms and distance learning facilities may bypass the orientation center and mansion and grounds experience and access the facility through an auxiliary entrance immediately inside the main gate.

## LEARNING TOOLS

The museum and education center signals a new era for Mount Vernon. Educational resources such as a distance learning center, designed to connect communities to Mount Vernon with virtual teacher workshops, lesson plans, and other learning materials, and a hands on history area for children further communicate the themes and ideas of the Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education

Center. The building is also the equivalent of Washington’s presidential library with classroom space and computers that provide access to more than 40,000 letters written by Washington during his lifetime, as well as official papers, and many of the more than 900 volumes of books that Washington owned.

As former US Supreme Court Associate Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, keynote speaker at the groundbreaking for the new facilities, noted “A visit to Mount Vernon upon completion of this project will be far more relevant. What the [Mount Vernon] Ladies hope to save this time is not the estate and grounds but George Washington himself.”

By her assessment, “Washington is not just another hero. He stands apart. Just as he brought Americans together in his lifetime . . . he can bring them together today.” 

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