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UNCOVERING HISTORY AT FERRY FARM

*The excavation and
reconstruction of
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By Lena Anthony

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON FOUNDATION

In 1833, the artist John Gadsby Chapman painted a landscape of Fredericksburg, Va. The town was the subject, but the real focus of the painting was Chapman's surroundings. Situated on a ridge along the Rappahannock River, the artist was there to capture one of almost a dozen Virginia landscapes depicting historic sites from George Washington's life. This ridge, across the river from Fredericksburg, was the site of Washington's boyhood home. It's where he lived from 1738 until at least 1753. It's where he learned to survey, where he joined the Masons, and where he first expressed an interest in joining the military.



However, when Chapman painted the landscape, nothing stood but a pile of rubble. The Civil War ravaged the site even further, as the Washington Home Farm, which by then was known as Ferry Farm, served as a staging ground in the Battle of Fredericksburg in 1862, and was held by the Union Army for the rest of the war.

In the years that followed, the property changed hands several times, houses were built and razed, the land was farmed for profit, and the site even became a home for troubled boys for a short while. Attempts were made intermittently to preserve the property, but most were unsuccessful.

After spending almost a century as an endangered site, Ferry Farm is rising again, as a team of archaeologists, architectural historians and skilled artisans with the George Washington Foundation work to reconstruct Washington's boyhood home and uncover new information about the early life of America's first commander in chief. Having positively identified the home in 2008, the foundation is moving onto its next big endeavor—constructing an interpretive replica of the 1740s Washington house.

Saving Ferry Farm

More than once in its history did someone buy—or attempt to buy—the property for the sake of its connection to George Washington.

After the Civil War, a family from Pennsylvania with ancestral ties to one of Washington's generals in the Continental Army purchased the property. According to historical archaeologist Philip Levy in *Where the Cherry Tree Grew: The Story of Ferry Farm, George Washington's Boyhood Home* (St. Martin's Press, 2013), the family "came down and cleaned up the damage on the acres including the old Washington home lot."

Levy points out that in 1925, after the property had already been bought and sold again, an article written by George Allen England in the *Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine* urged Daughters to "rescue from oblivion a landmark that should be a priceless national heritage." According to Levy, England published impassioned pleas such as these for various audiences because he was promised a finders fee for a buyer.

Finally, in 1928, a fledgling organization attempted to buy the site, but was unable to come up with enough money to close the deal. At least two other attempts to purchase the site by preservation-minded parties also failed.

Not until 1996, when Ferry Farm was rezoned for commercial development and Wal-Mart was eyeing the site for a new store, were preservationists successful. That year the George Washington Foundation purchased 36 acres of Ferry Farm. Thanks to two subsequent acquisitions, the foundation now owns 113 acres. Additionally, a 1998 bill in Congress provided an easement with the National Park Service to help protect Ferry Farm in perpetuity.

"It could have been developed commercially long before our foundation and this community were galvanized to rescue it," said Bill Garner, president of the George Washington Foundation. "But for the ownership of that land remaining in private hands for so long, we would not have had the opportunity we were given to acquire the property."

Digging for Clues

Once the foundation took ownership, it made several small-scale attempts at excavation, but large-scale efforts didn't begin until 2002. Since then, a team led by Director of Archaeology David Muraca has uncovered more than 700,000 artifacts over 13 field seasons. The oldest artifact found on site was a 10,000-year-old spear used by American Indians. In addition to the Washington home, including an intact cellar, they also

found remains of a slave quarter, a kitchen and a storage building, as well as a house that predated Washington's arrival and one built after Washington left Ferry Farm.

Muraca expects excavation on Ferry Farm to continue for at least another decade, as he and his team, which includes interns, students and volunteers from across the country, continue to discover outbuildings and other artifacts.

In the meantime, the organization is moving forward with the reconstruction of Washington's childhood home. It broke ground on the project in April 2015. Garner expects the interpretive replica to be completed in late 2017.



“This chapter in George Washington’s life is not very well documented, in part because there isn’t a lot of information.

With this excavation, we’re trying to understand the formative processes that took place here that made George Washington the exceptional man he was. Whatever he became, he became here.”

– DAVID MURACA, DIRECTOR OF ARCHAEOLOGY

Reconstructing History

The home will appear just as it did when Washington lived there—red painted clapboard on the outside, a steeply pitched roof, four rooms plus a central hallway on the first floor, two bedrooms in the finished upstairs loft, and an in-ground cellar beneath the central passage.

The restoration team is confident about these and other details of the house because of their extensive historical research, as well as exhaustive archaeological research. For example, a pair of room-by-room inventories of the house from 1738 and 1743 give an idea of the layout of the house, while artifacts found in those locations lend insight into how the Washington family may have used those spaces.

In addition to using period construction techniques and materials, including hand-forged hardware, timber-frame

walls and the same type of Aquia sandstone that was used in the original home, the foundation is planning on incorporating interpretive opportunities in the construction process.

Helical piles and precast concrete beams will allow the replica to be constructed just over the original structure’s footprint, but without jeopardizing the integrity of the remains. Muraca said this method will actually help preserve the remains, as well as allow visitors to see inside the actual Washington cellar.

“When people come to visit, we want them to be able to walk onto the Washington landscape and leave the 21st century,” Muraca said. “The best way to do that is to create an environment that looks exactly like it was back then. Any nail will be driven into the wood the same way, so it looks exactly right.”



DAR State Regent Virginia Storage (L-R, with DAR President General Lynn Young and Presley Wagoner) chose Ferry Farm as the focus of her State Regent’s Project, raising more than \$125,000. She helped welcome a large group of DAR members in October 2015 to a tour at Ferry Farm.

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON FOUNDATION: NSDAR



Working with Mark Wenger, an architectural historian at Mesick Cohen Wilson Baker Architects, which has participated in restoration projects at Montpelier, Monticello and Poplar Forest, the foundation's next step is conceptualizing the rooms based on the archaeological and historical data from the site, as well as standing examples of homes from the area. Outside supporters, such as the Virginia Daughters of the American Revolution, will help underwrite the rooms, including furnishings and details.

A lifelong resident of Fredericksburg, State Regent Virginia Storage chose Ferry Farm as the focus of her State Regent's Project in 2013, as a response to the George Washington Foundation's \$40 million capital campaign. Her project, which will fund a downstairs room, has so far raised more than \$125,000, including a \$5,000 donation from the National Society. A matching grant secured by the George Washington Foundation will double all gifts made to the Virginia State Regent's Project between now and March 1, 2016.

"When Wal-Mart tried to buy the site and place a store there, that, to me, was the ultimate insult to historic preservations in our area," she said. "This always made an impression on me, and I knew that if I ever became State Regent, my project would support this historically significant site in one way or another."

Understanding Washington's Childhood

The goal of the excavation and recreation of Washington's boyhood home has not just been to uncover landscape elements of his surroundings, but also to better understand the life of George and his family members during this time.

"This chapter in George Washington's life is not very well documented, in part because there isn't a lot of information," Muraca said. "With this excavation, we're trying to understand the formative processes that took place here that made



Clockwise from top left: George Washington Foundation archaeologists screen for artifacts. • The Aquia stone cellar of the 18th-century Washington house • Archaeologists at the Washington house site
Opposite page, top: An aerial view of Washington's Ferry Farm

George Washington the exceptional man he was. Whatever he became, he became here."

More and more, that evidence points to Washington's mother, Mary, who lived at Ferry Farm for almost 35 years, and the efforts she made as a widowed mother to provide for her children and prepare them for their future stations in life.

Some of the items found thus far include cufflinks adorned with foxes alluding to George's favorite sport, fox hunting. A tambour hook recovered at the site is the earliest example of this fancy form of needlework in Virginia. Meanwhile, fragments of a small punch bowl—decorated with cherries—are thought to have belonged to Mary.

"When you combine them together, all of these examples show a house on the edge of fashionability, but from a family without a lot of means to be fashionable," Muraca said.

Mrs. Storage said the real story of Ferry Farm is not the child who grew up there, but the mother who raised him.

"George recognized Mary's impact on his life when he said, 'All that I am I owe to my mother. I attribute all my success in life to the moral, intellectual and physical education I received from her.'" And that would have happened at Ferry Farm. 🐾