

*This year **Cooperative Living** is taking a road trip along the length of U.S. Route 1 as it crosses Virginia from the North Carolina border to Washington, D.C. In each issue, correspondent Deborah Huso will relate her experiences along the way.*



by Deborah Huso,
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On the Trail of Washington

As Route 1 passes through Fairfax County, it offers opportunities aplenty for getting to know our nation's first president and his family.



Dirt is placed in buckets, then run through screens to search for artifacts. Deputy Director for Archaeology Eleanor Breen (right) says her team's specialty is finding history in the ground.

As I head up Route 1 (now known as the Richmond Highway) through Fairfax County, the sun is baking down on my car with 100-degree temps on a brutal day in July. I'm headed to Mount Vernon, the home of our nation's first president. It's a place I've visited countless times since childhood, but today I'm getting a different look at George Washington's estate on the Potomac River. Instead of exploring the house and gardens, I'm set to explore the dirt.



Yes, that's right. It's 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and I've decided to spend my morning hanging out with Mount Vernon's four permanent archaeologists, student interns and volunteers as they sift below the foundation of the kitchen, looking for clues about what the estate looked like before Washington began making improvements to it as his stature in Virginia grew.

By the time I make it from my car to the latest archaeological dig, I'm drenched in perspiration, my notebook is damp, and I'm wondering why I ever decided this was a good idea. But pretty soon Deputy Director for Archaeology Eleanor Breen has me entirely distracted from the heat and humidity, as she describes the sleuth-like activities of her team on the ground here just outside the mansion's front door.

"When Washington started renting this house in 1744, it looked very different from what you see now," says Breen, who has been digging around Mount Vernon for 12 years now. "In the 18th century, being able to show your wealth through material possessions

was a big thing ... just like today," she adds. "More money, bigger house." Washington not only added onto the house at Mount Vernon, he also tore down many of the outbuildings immediately around the mansion.

"We want to figure out where these buildings were located," Breen explains. And that's the purpose of her team's digging on this summer day. Using surveying and mapping equipment, they are trying to find the foundation of the estate's original dairy. "Our specialty is finding history in the ground," Breen says, as she points out an old drainage tile her team is unearthing this morning.

TREASURE MAPPING

The archaeologists here dig out 10x10-foot squares, which are all mapped out on a grid, so they can trace exactly where certain artifacts have been found. They dump the dirt they dig up into buckets, then run it through a screen searching for anything—buttons, coins, flecks of metal. When they find artifacts, they seal them up in plastic bags labeled with that 10x10 square.

The work seems fatiguing to me even though before I became a straight history major, I dabbled with the idea of going into archaeology. One of the archaeologists here, Karen Price, shows me an 1835 nickel she has found, which gives her a date reference for that dirt layer. Price first came to Mount Vernon as an intern and never left. "A lot of people think this work is tedious," she says, "but it's better than being in an office all day."

The archaeologists have an office of sorts, however. It's the lab. And most visitors never see it, but today I get a tour. Inside a clean and air-conditioned space, I get a firsthand look at George Washington's trash. Yes, you read that correctly. In the 1990s, archaeologists uncovered Mount Vernon's "landfill," a virtual goldmine of 350,000 artifacts. "All that trash dates to before the Revolutionary War," Breen explains, showing me pieces of discarded plates, teapots, and a delicate piece of silver that Breen and her colleagues remarkably traced to being a decorative element on one of Washington's scabbards.

At the archaeology lab, I meet one of Mount Vernon's many volunteers, Becky Garber. She's a certified archaeological volunteer and comes to Mount Vernon once a week. She got into archaeology because of her own interest in 18th-century ceramics. I am watching her pick through dirt and pebbles with a brush, looking for clues to the past.

"We bring history to life through what people were using," Breen says, as we watch



Archaeologists at Mount Vernon dig out 10x10-foot squares, which are all mapped out on a grid, so they can trace exactly where certain artifacts have been found. In the 1990s, archaeologists uncovered the home's landfill, where artifacts like discarded teapots (left) and plates (below) were buried.



Garber. "It's exciting when you find something. The thrill never goes away."

Breen, who is actually a rarity here — a native northern Virginian — first came to Mount Vernon when she was working on her Master's degree. At that time, she worked on an eight-year-long dig at George Washington's Distillery and Gristmill. "The distillery you see there today is actually a reconstruction based on what we dug up," Breen points out. "We didn't know much about industrial-level distilleries except Washington's. He had five."

AN AVID ENTREPRENEUR

And no, our first president was not a lush, but he was an avid entrepreneur. By the mid-1760s, he had changed his main cash crop from tobacco to wheat, exporting flour to Europe and the West Indies. In 1797, he opened a whiskey distillery to take even greater advantage of his grain production, and today the distillery produces whiskey based on the president's original mash bill.

Heading over to the west side of Route 1 from the distillery, I find more history of

the First Family at Woodlawn, the home of Washington's nephew, Major Lawrence Lewis, and Martha Washington's granddaughter, "Nellie" Parke Custis, whom Lewis married in 1799. As a wedding gift, Washington presented the couple with 2,000 acres of his Mount Vernon estate. And, according to Meredith Mitchell, Woodlawn's visitor services manager, George Washington selected the house site for the nuptials, which commands a knoll with a direct view of Mount Vernon.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation has owned Woodlawn since the 1950s, and it was actually the first property the Trust opened to the public.



Visit Woodlawn (left), the home of Washington's nephew, Major Lawrence Lewis, and Martha Washington's granddaughter, "Nellie" Parke Custis, whom Lewis married in 1799. Also located in the Woodlawn complex, the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Pope-Leighey House (below) offers an interesting architectural counterpoint.

Mitchell is the property's only full-time employee. She hails from Hot Springs, just up the road from my stomping grounds in Highland, and jokes, "You and I should hang out." And perhaps we should, as she has a lively sense of humor about the occupants of Woodlawn, remarking that "Nellie" was never very happy here, having felt isolated in the country and being married to a man who turned out to be "not very nice." Nellie's history leans toward the tragic, too, though, as she was also the mother of eight children, seven of whom preceded her in death.

A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

Also part of the Woodlawn complex, though entirely unrelated historically, is the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed



Pope-Leighey House, which the Trust acquired in 1966. "The house was originally located in Falls Church," Mitchell explains, "but when Interstate 66 was being planned, it was set to go straight through the property." Given that it is one of only three Wright houses in the D.C. metro area, the Trust decided to save it, moved it to the property at Woodlawn, and now offers tours of this Usonian home designed for a middle-class American family.

"The two houses have nothing in common," Mitchell remarks. "The Pope-Leighey house is like the anti-Woodlawn." Compact, small, and unassuming, Woodlawn features Wright's signature flat roof, organic materials like brick and cypress, and simple lines. "Woodlawn dominates the environment," Mitchell says, "whereas the Pope-Leighey house blends into it."

Built in 1940 by journalist Warren Pope and his wife Charlotte, the 1,200-square-foot home cost \$7,000 to construct. Keep in mind that a typical house of the day would have cost about \$1,200. But Pope was a Wright fan, favoring his open public spaces — a natural light-filled living area open to a dining room — and small utilitarian spaces for family — bedrooms and bathrooms. The home also makes heavy use of a new material of the post-Depression era — plywood. Wright built both furniture and light fixtures from it because it represented a cheap lumber option for the average family.

Having recently returned from a trip to Wright's Taliesin estate in Wisconsin, I find much that I recognize in the Pope-Leighey house, including the perfect sense of calm one often feels on entering a Frank Lloyd Wright structure — surrounded by wood, natural light, and earthy Cherokee red floors, quite the contrast to the elaborate façades and décor of Woodlawn and Mount Vernon. ■

IF YOU GO ...

Before you begin exploring **Fairfax County**, visit online at www.fxva.com or call 800-732-4732 for travel information. If you visit **Mount Vernon** (3200 Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, 703-780-2000, www.mountvernon.org), plan for at least a half-day visit if you want to tour the mansion, explore the grounds, and maybe even chat with the archaeologists you'll likely find on site. If you want to explore **George Washington's trash**, you can do so online at www.mountvernonmidden.org. Thinking about getting your hands dirty? Mount Vernon's archaeologists are always looking for volunteers! For more information, contact Karen Price at kprice@mountvernon.org.

While you're visiting Mount Vernon, stop in for lunch at the **Mount Vernon Inn Restaurant**, which features period-costumed servers in Colonial-style dining rooms (703-780-0011). Then head over to **George Washington's Distillery and Gristmill** (5514 Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, 703-780-2000), where you can buy some of the whiskey made from Washington's original mash bill.

In the afternoon, pay a visit to the 1805 **Woodlawn** mansion (9000 Richmond Highway, 703-780-4000, www.woodlawn1805.org), which was not only home to



George Washington's Distillery and Gristmill

Washington's adopted granddaughter but also later to an experimental Quaker abolitionist community, which ran an interracial school before the Civil War. Then check out the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed **Pope-Leighey House** (9000 Richmond Highway, 703-780-4000, www.popeleighey1940.org). You might also pay a visit to **Pohick Church** (9301 Richmond Highway, 703-339-6572, www.pohick.org), a historic Episcopal church whose 18th-century congregation included the Washingtons, Masons, and Fairfaxes. Inside is a 12th-century baptismal font.