

Martha Washington and the Women of the Revolutionary Generation

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Introduction

Visitors to Mt. Vernon often come to learn about the deeds and exploits of General George Washington. His deeds and exploits as commander of the Revolutionary forces helped to usher the American nation into being. Along with Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and George Mason, George Washington's role as a Founding Father is prominent in the public's historical understanding of American Independence and the Revolution. However, little is known of the life and experiences of his reserved and very private wife, Martha Dandridge Custis Washington.

By the 1730's, white colonial women's access to public space and expression had become significantly circumscribed, leaving them to express themselves through informal means – fashion, propriety, and social relations. This is the world into which Martha Dandridge was born. It was a world populated by powerful plantation owners, fashionable elite women, as well as by middling white planters, and enslaved Africans. The Center for History and New Media (CHNM) at George Mason University proposes to create an online exhibit that uses the contours and major events in Martha Washington's life to introduce visitors to the experiences of women's lives during the 18th century, including women's access to property and education, their role in the Revolution, their thoughts on the promises of rights called for in the founding documents, as well as their everyday experiences of marriage, motherhood, labor, sickness, and death. In each case, these issues will be explored through the documents, artifacts, and events of Martha Washington's life and the lives of the women she lived, socialized, and corresponded with.

An interpretive web exhibit will draw a whole new universe of users to Mount Vernon's materials. The estate draws visitors from around the nation, but with every season only a limited number of Americans can make the journey to Virginia to view the mansions, the gardens, and the museum and education center. This site will reach out to history enthusiasts, teachers and students, and members of the general public to introduce them to often overlooked aspects of the Colonial and Early American experience.

Drawing on the best scholarship on Colonial women's history, this site will provide an interpretive framework for understanding the artifacts, images, and documents that illustrate these key issues in Colonial and Early American women's lives. Particularly focusing on the collections at Mount Vernon, this treasure trove of artifacts related to Martha Washington's life will be the centerpiece of the site. The site will also feature a digital archive of Martha Washington's correspondence. At the time of George Washington's death, she burned their letters, so there is little in the way of intimate correspondence from that marriage. However, documents remain from an earlier period, illuminating elements of her experiences from the time

of her widowhood in the 1757 until in 1802. The site will include scanned images of the documents, where available, and transcriptions of each text.

Martha Washington's life was lived within an extended universe of friends, acquaintances and enslaved servants, who also experienced the joys and hardships of the revolutionary period. This circle of women provides an essential compliment to Martha Washington's own story. Thus, in addition to the documents and letters from Martha Washington, the site will include the writings of other prominent women, including Mercy Otis Warren, Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison and Judith Sargent Murray, rendering a rounded picture of this circle of women during the struggle for independence. To assemble these women's writings we will draw upon a host of documentary projects and archival collections around the country. Additionally, Martha Washington interacted with and corresponded with numerous women, yet unfamiliar to the general public, who provide a glimpse into the world of the Colonial era. Though from different backgrounds and stations, these women traversed similar life course events, such as childhood, education, work, marriage, motherhood, and illness. At each turn, the site will also introduce the public to the circumstances and lives of these women as their paths crossed with the General's wife.

Site Features

I. Narrative Exhibit:

The main attraction of the site will be a multimedia exhibit that employs cutting edge web technology to introduce the public to the life of Martha Washington and to the lives of the other women of the Revolutionary generation. The exhibit will include strong narrative elements that draw on the latest scholarship about the lives of women in this era, as well as featuring significant artifacts and documents that support that narrative. Divided into six sections, the organization of the exhibit will follow major life events, including her early life, marriage and widowhood, life with George Washington at Mt. Vernon, the Revolutionary War and Independence, the years as First Lady, and finally, the return to private life. Each section will include an introductory section that provides biographical information about Martha Washington, and the lives of the significant individuals with whom she shared her world, both at home in Virginia and throughout the Colonies during the Revolution. Lastly, the exhibit will be accompanied by a timeline that situates the key events in Martha Washington's life within the context of large events in Colonial and Early American history.

a. Early Life (1731-1750)

Location: Dandridge plantation, Chestnut Grove, near Williamsburg

- Parents, status, class position
- Planter life in VA
- Childhood/education/recreation

b. Marriage/Widowhood (1750-1757-1759)

Location: Custis plantation (Arlington Plantation), Pumunkey River (at one time temporary capital of Virginia Colony, when Gov. Berkeley fled Bacon's Rebellion)

- Good wives (social expectations)
 - Children and parenthood
 - Widowhood (legal status, property, etc.)
- c. Life with GW/Plantation Life (1759-1775, 1783-1789)
- Location: Mt. Vernon, enlarged and remodeled
- Everyday life and sociability,
 - Women's labor
 - Health and disease
- d. Revolution/Independence (1775-1789)
- Location: Cambridge headquarters (Dec. 1775- June 1776)
Valley Forge (February 1778),
- Gender and women in the call for independence
 - Home front
 - Women at war
- e. First Lady/Presidency/Diplomacy (1789-1797)
- Location: Philadelphia and New York
- Representing the new nation
 - US and the world
- f. Twilight Years (1797-1802)
- Location: Mt. Vernon
- Established nation
 - Washington Legacy

II. *Archive:*

While the exhibit section will provide a guided narrative tour of Martha Washington's life and times, an accompanying archive will include a searchable and browseable catalog of every artifact, image, and document discussed in the exhibit. First and foremost, the archive will include scanned images of all of Martha Washington's surviving letters (as collected in *A Worthy Partner: The Papers of Martha Washington*). These scanned letters will also be OCR'd, so that the contents of the correspondence will be fully accessible to the site's search engine. Additionally, the scanned images will be integrated into the teaching modules when they support the focus of those units. The archive will also include a selection of objects not directly mentioned in the exhibit, but which were used to research the narrative or are related in some other way. Each object will be tagged with keywords to make it easy for users to sort materials by theme, time period, and type. Textual documents will include full transcriptions for increased searchability. Three key material cultural objects from the collection that are used in the teaching modules will be represented in 360° QuickTime Virtual Reality (QTVR), allowing users to zoom in and examine objects from all sides. CHNM will arrange for a qualified photographer to take the necessary images for the QTVR. Finally, full object metadata, citation information, and an advanced search option will be provided for researchers.

III. Teaching with the site:

To help students contextualize the materials presented in the archive and exhibit and to provide teachers with structured activities for classroom use, the site will include three rich learning modules, each one focused on an important document or artifact in the archive. Based on CHNM's successful collaboration with the National Museum of American History (<http://objectofhistory.org>), each module will begin with a short introductory video about the object and its historical context. After watching the video, students will be encouraged to examine an additional 10-20 supporting sources, including other documents, artifacts, images, and audio and video interviews with curators and historians. Finally, a culminating activity will allow students to use the materials they have explored to create their own personal online exhibit and email the finished product to their teacher and classmates for discussion. Each module will be accompanied by a manual that will guide teachers in using this section of the website and help them use the materials and activity to teach historical thinking skills.

IV. Related web resources:

The final section of the website will provide a list of annotated links to other quality sites on related topics. Annotations will be written by professional historians or advanced graduate students and will include brief descriptions of each site's content, suggestions for classroom use, and a listing of what kinds of resources (images, audio, video, documents, teaching materials, etc.) may be found there.

About CHNM

Since 1994, CHNM (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/>) has used digital media and computer technology to democratize history—to incorporate multiple voices, reach diverse audiences, and encourage popular participation in presenting and preserving the past. CHNM combines cutting edge digital media with the latest and best historical scholarship to promote an inclusive understanding of the past as well as broad historical literacy. CHNM maintains more than four dozen online history projects directed at diverse audiences, making them available at no cost through its website. CHNM's website receives more than 300 million hits and 10 million visitors per year—making it one of the busiest non-commercial history education sites on the entire World Wide Web. CHNM's staff of more than forty people (including ten with doctoral degrees and five ABDs) includes those skilled in all aspects of digital history—database architecture, software engineering, web development and design, preservation, and archiving. CHNM's work has been recognized with major awards and grants from the American Historical Association, the National Humanities Center, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the Department of Education, the Library of Congress, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the National Historic Records and Publication Commission, Atlantic Philanthropies, and the Sloan, Mellon, Hewlett, Rockefeller, Gould, Delmas, and Kellogg foundations.