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*"I think with you that the life of a husband of all others is the most delectable. It is honorable.
 It is amusing and, with judicious management, it is profitable."*

George Washington to
 Alexander Spotswood
 February 13, 1788

In February I visited Mount Vernon and enjoyed seeing the lovely mansion of our first president, but limited time denied me opportunity to fully explore the plantation grounds. So I made a return visit since then and was fortunate to have Dean Norton, Director of Landscape, give me a behind-the-scenes tour of the grounds.

George was a farmer at Mount Vernon for over forty-five years and by the end of his life he owned almost 8,000 acres of land, or almost five miles. He was a practical farmer, growing crops for profit. Over the years he changed the landscape to suit his own taste and to create a plantation suitable for a gentleman of his stature.

In 1760, realizing that tobacco depleted the soil of nutrients and that the tobacco market was waning, he switched to growing mostly new crops such as wheat, oats, rye, and corn. Wheat was a good crop because he could sell it to the West Indies for cash. With the rye he made rye whiskey. In 1799 he earned \$7,500 from his whiskey distillery alone and the mash from it was fed to his pigs. He is said to have boasted that his pigs were so fat they could hardly walk. He sold his fattened pigs for profit.

He read and studied about new approaches to farming in an effort to improve his crops. He applied "new husbandry" and experimented with planting in straight rows rather than scatter planting. He instituted deep plowing and he built a dung repository, which in our language today might be called a compost bin. He corresponded with other planters, and in 1795 Thomas Jefferson suggested to him the use of chicory as cattle fodder, calling chicory "one of the greater acquisitions a farmer can have." Jefferson grew it with seeds he had imported from Italy. The following year Jefferson sent him some pecan trees.

One of George's notable agricultural contributions was the introduction of the American mule to the Virginia farmer. He had his mules bred because he found them to be capable of hard work and they were inexpensive to feed.

He had some other animals, hog Island sheep, chickens and, of course, horses, which he built an innovative treading barn. It was a round, 16-sided barn in which the horses tread on the second floor threshing the wheat. The grain fell through to the floor below. This unique "treading house" burned in the early 1900s, but the reconstructed building, built according to Washington's plans and drawing, is remarkable!

George also started to plant living fences instead of wooden ones in an effort to conserve the woods on his land. He wanted to use what wood was cut for fuel instead of for fencing.

The grounds are beautiful with twelve original outbuildings and thirteen original trees still remaining from the time of Washington's residency. They are diverse, such as white mulberry, oaks, hollies, tulip poplars, and willow trees.

In this environment a new image of the man began to take form for me. Upon learning of his athletic hobbies such as fox hunting three days a week, it conjured up a new image. I learned he even threw a javelin on the large east lawn and challenged anyone to beat his throw! He loved horses and dogs and was a breeder of the American fox hound.

His views about the Native Americans were revealed when in May 1779, in an effort to encourage friendship and to show respect to Indian tribes, he reviewed the troops accompanied by Indian chiefs.

Although a slave owner, he decided during the war when seeing brave African-American soldiers fighting that slavery was wrong. In a letter to Tobias Lear in 1793 he wrote that he wished "from my soul that the legislative of this state could see the policy of a gradual Abolition of Slavery." Upon his death all of his slaves were freed.

His physical appearance was described by Jas. Thacker, M.D., a surgeon in the American Revolutionary Army in his daily journal. In 1777 he wrote, "His tall and noble stature and just proportions, his fine, cheerful, open countenance – simple and modest deportment are all calculated to interest every beholder in his favor, and to command veneration and respect. He is feared even when silent and beloved even while we are unconscious of the motive."

Since my visit I can no longer accept the Gilbert Stuart portrait of George as the virile and vibrant man who lived at Mount Vernon, but instead I see the strong, upright image of the Charles Nelson Peale painting. George appears in uniform with his horse, with Nassau Hall in the background.

In a letter to a friend in reference to his future after the end of the war, Washington wrote, "the first wish of my soul is to return to that peaceful retirement and domestic ease and happiness, whence I came."

I cannot let March pass without a mention of St. Patrick's Day. It was on March 17, 1776, St. Patrick's Day, that the British troops evacuated Boston in the Revolution and as the pass word for General Washington's troops they used "Saint Patrick."

Janet Guthrie