
The house library at Mount Vernon makes it big, thanks to the Ladies’ Association

*by Beth DeFrancis Sun*

While more than 85 million visitors have descended upon George Washington's Mount Vernon home since it first opened to the public in 1860, few tourists have seen the new National Library for the Study of George Washington, which remains nearly hidden from public view but within a short sheep's bleat of the Mount Vernon estate. Chief Librarian and Archivist Mark Santangelo explains that the Library’s founders wanted to build a serious research facility, off the main tour, that would inspire scholarship and advance education. Although the facility is open to “the people” (and not restricted to academic-pedigree patrons), visits are by appointment only.

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The 45,000 square foot library is situated on 15 wooded acres that were likely farmed during Washington’s time. Beyond the security gate, where registered visitors are required to identify themselves, a winding road leads up to the forecourt at the main entrance. Inside, visitors find themselves in a skylight-infused entry hall where large glass doors provide views of the main reading room and the wooded courtyard beyond. “A goal of the design team was to create a timeless place that is elegant, ordered, and principled—qualities that will allow the library and grounds to be, in subtle ways, both reflective of the man and connected to the place,” says design architect Glen Neighbors of Ayers Saint Gross. The building’s grandeur is accentuated by the generous use of 27,000 square-feet of finished wood veneer. “Though rarely used in decorative applications, the wood of choice, American Sycamore, is a tree that grows at Mount Vernon, and one that Washington would have known,” according to the Library brochure.

At the heart of the Library, however, is the inner, oval-shaped core of the Rare Books & Manuscripts Room, which safeguards original Washington-owned books and matching titles acquired by Mount Vernon to duplicate the first President’s original library. Currently Mount Vernon owns 62 titles (in 103 volumes) of the approximate 1,200 titles that were owned by George Washington himself. However, Mount Vernon’s commitment to collection development can easily be summed up in this single purchase: On June 22, 2012, a surviving copy of the Acts of the First Congress owned by George Washington himself was purchased at a Christie’s auction for $9.8 million by the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, the oldest national historical preservation society in the country. Christie’s published estimate for the book was $2–3 million. However, the Board entered the auction prepared to pay almost $10 million for the book, in the event the bidding escalated to that amount.

Given the relatively modest size of the original GW book collection, the compact circumference of the oval rare book room makes for a glove-like fit. The generous shelf space, high ceilings, and angled light lend “import” to each of the individual volumes. And while only about 100 of these are the exact physical books that resided in President Washington’s Library, Mount Vernon has done a commendable job locating copies of all but about 25 percent of the collection. George Washington’s personal bookplate, based on his family crest and the motto, Exitus Acta Probat (“the result is the test of the action”), was affixed inside the original volumes, which would help to explain why so many fake “originals”—bearing authentic-appearing but bogus bookplates—have appeared on the rare book market. Given the significance of Washington’s custom-designed bookplate, however, it’s fitting that Washington Sculptor Raymond J. Kaskey was invited to create a six-foot-high pewter-toned bas-relief interpretation of the bookplate, which now decorates the inner-most rare book room wall. An original Rembrandt Peale portrait of George Washington is also on display in The John and Adrienne Mars Rare Books & Manuscripts Room.

While it’s tempting to view the National George Washington Library as a museum, it quickly becomes clear that patrons and educators are making good hands-on use of the brand new facility. While I was chatting with the Library’s chief librarian, research historian Mary Thompson came bustling through the room with a couple of researchers. Santangelo explains that Mary, who has been at the estate for 30 years, is referred to as “the Google of Mount Vernon.” However, it’s another employee by the name of Adam Shprintzen who is considered to be the digital guru. “One of our goals is to digitize as much as possible,” Santangelo explains. He also goes on to say that the Library staff will respond to reference questions from outside users (aren’t librarians great?!) and assist onsite visitors in using the collections. Altogether the Library contains more than 2,500 rare books; 6,000 historic manuscripts; more than 12,000 books, journals, audiovisual items, information files, and electronic resources; and more than 5,000 special collection items (scrapbooks, photographs, postcards, and memorabilia). The Mount Vernon institutional archives are also housed in the library.

The Library will also serve as the permanent home of The Papers of George Washington. Established at the University of Virginia in 1968, the project is a collaborative effort between the University and the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association to publish a comprehensive edition of Washington’s correspondence—a collection of more than 135,000 letters and documents representing a rich grouping of American historical manuscripts.

Not only does the Library aim to inspire scholarship, but it will advance Mount Vernon’s educational mission by generating new classroom resources and enrichment
materials for teachers across the grade levels. It will also offer short- and long-term residential fellowships for scholars; host lecture series and symposia; build partnerships with academic, business, cultural, military, and government institutions; and encourage leaders in government, military, corporate, educational, and non-profit organizations to gather to discuss important issues, drawing guidance and inspiration from Washington's life, achievements, and character. Several state-of-the-art conference and meeting rooms will help make this all possible.

“We’re playing catch-up,” explains Santangelo, referring to the fact that what was once a small Mount Vernon house library has morphed into a multi-million dollar 45,000-square-foot research facility. What attracted Santangelo, who came to the Mount Vernon Library from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2012, was the opportunity to come on board at the beginning and to help shape the Library’s official policy. Although the library project had been in the planning stages for at least half a dozen years (with many experts consulted and multiple charrettes hosted during the design and planning phases) it didn’t open until after Santangelo had joined the Mount Vernon staff.

As a result of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association’s successful $106.4 million capital campaign, the Fred W. Smith National Library for the Study of George Washington at Mount Vernon opened its doors on September 27, 2013. For those who couldn’t attend the grand opening (during which time Senators Tim McKain and Mark Warner and Author David McCullough offered words of inspiration), there was much to see and celebrate on the George Washington Library’s website. During the opening ceremony, Mount Vernon’s media campaign reached 55 million viewers, whether they watched on television or streamed online.

For those who either live in close proximity to the Mount Vernon estate or are planning a visit, the Library hosts public tours of the facility and offers free evening book talks. For more information on the George Washington library, visit the website at http://www.mountvernon.org/library.