

George Mason

Personal

George Mason was born in 1725 to George and Ann Thomson Mason. Their first son and a fourth generation Virginian, Mason lived with his family on a Fairfax County plantation. His father tragically drowned in a boating accident when Mason was ten, and his mother was left to raise George and his two siblings alone.

After studying with tutors and attending a private academy in Maryland, at age 21 Mason took over his inheritance of approximately 20,000 acres spread across several counties in Virginia and Maryland. Four years later, in 1750, Mason married 16-year-old Ann Eilbeck, who bore him 12 children, nine who survived past childhood. Mason adored Ann and was devastated when she died in 1773 at the age of 39. Relying on his eldest daughter to help run the domestic side of the plantation's operation, Mason remained a widower until 1780 when he married Sarah Brent.

Mason owned 80,000 to 100,000 acres at his death in 1792. He is buried at Gunston Hall next to his first wife, Ann.

Political

Although highly respected by Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and James Madison, Mason did not aspire to join his peers in public office. When he was asked to take Washington's seat in the Virginia legislature, a slot vacated when Washington was named Chief of the Continental Army, Mason reluctantly agreed. In 1776 he was Fairfax County's representative to the Virginia Convention and was appointed to a committee to draft a "Declaration of Rights" and a constitution to allow Virginia to act as an independent political body.

Complaining about the "useless Members" of the committee, Mason soon found himself authoring the first draft of the *Virginia Declaration of Rights* (more information can be found under "Virginia Declaration of Rights" page). Drawing from Enlightenment philosopher John Locke, among others, Mason asserted "That all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights . . . among which are the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety." This document was the first in America to call for freedom of the press, tolerance of religion, proscription of unreasonable searches, and the right to a fair and speedy trial.

In 1787, Mason was chosen to attend the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, where he was one of the most prolific debaters. Distressed over the amount of power being given to the federal government and the Convention's unwillingness to abolish the slave trade, Mason refused to sign the *Constitution*. One of three dissenters, Mason's refusal to support the new *Constitution* made him unpopular and destroyed his friendship with Washington, who later would refer to Mason as his former friend.

Mason's defense of individual liberties reverberated throughout the colonies, however, and a public outcry ensued. As a result, at the first session of the First Congress, Madison took up the cause and introduced a bill of rights that echoed Mason's *Declaration of Rights*. The resultant first ten amendments to the *Constitution*, also called the *U.S. Bill of Rights*, pleased Mason, who said, "I have received much Satisfaction from the Amendments to the federal Constitution, which have lately passed. . . ."

Invited to become one of Virginia's senators in the First U.S. Senate, Mason declined and finally was able to retire to Gunston Hall, where he remained until his death on October 7, 1792.

Mansion & Collections

Gunston Hall

Begun in the mid-1750s, Mason's house is an outstanding example of an 18th-century Virginia mansion. Typical of gentry dwellings of the late colonial period, Gunston Hall combines local building forms with designs borrowed from English architecture. The one-and-a-half story house with gable ends was a widely used Chesapeake architectural form. Unlike many of such houses, however, Gunston Hall was embellished with classical motifs that formed the canon of fashionable British design - a cornice, a pedimented Palladian doorway, and quoins (stone blocks outlining each corner), features which advertised this as the house of a man of means and education.

The house, completed circa 1759, was the work of many hands and minds. A letter to a neighbor detailing mortar recipes reveals that Mason was very involved with the construction of the house. He had the assistance of a number of British-trained craftsmen, prominent among them carpenter-joiner William Buckland and carver William Bernard Sears. Their influence and up-to-date designs are readily evident in the elaborately ornamented formal rooms, a most unusual treatment in a colonial Virginia house. Undoubtedly, though, the majority of carpenters, masons, and other craftsmen who worked on Gunston Hall were enslaved Africans or African-Americans.

Gunston Hall, which received its name from an ancestral home in England, also provides a fascinating study of the ongoing history of preservation in America. It has been re-examined and restored three times in the 20th century, with each generation bringing new knowledge and technologies to the search for the house as it stood in George Mason's day. Two earlier restorations (circa 1913 and 1950) have been superseded by work begun in the 1980s which sought to address questions unanswered by earlier projects. This painstakingly careful examination of Mason's dwelling has resulted in the gradual restoration of original features which had disappeared over the centuries.

Collections

The recent completion of a study of George Mason's household furnishings is guiding the site in its quest to come as close as modern scholarship will allow to portraying the interior of Gunston Hall during the planter's lifetime. Most notable in the collection are objects that once belonged to Mason. They range from pieces like an elaborate silver monteith (wine glass rinser) which the patriot inherited, to pieces Mason purchased, like a British card table probably bought circa 1760 to furnish his new house. A writing table is one of the most evocative objects in the collection as family records note that Mason did much of his work in helping to formulate new governmental forms for state and country sitting at this simple Virginia piece.

The collections on exhibit in the house and Visitors Center also feature 18th-century decorative arts which typify upper class homes of the period; these objects assist the site in telling the story of George Mason and his family and exploring how life was lived on a large plantation in the 1780s.

Gardens & Grounds

Gunston Hall is located on 550 scenic acres on the Potomac River. The grounds include gardens, a deer park, nature trails, pastures, and the Mason family burying ground.

Regular Garden

Noted for its central allée of English boxwood planted by George Mason, Gunston Hall's regular garden consists of one acre behind the mansion. Mason's fourth son, John, wrote an invaluable recollection of his years growing up at Gunston Hall and of the garden said, "My Father was fondest of his Garden. . . It was

here that my Father in good weather would several times a day pass out of his Study and walk for a considerable time wrapped in meditation . . .” The site is actively conducting an archaeological investigation of the area in an effort to gather information on George Mason’s original garden. These excavations, yielding many new insights on Mason’s garden, have been invaluable in the ongoing work to recreate George Mason’s original landscape. Slowly the former colonial revival features are being replaced by an authentic 18th-century garden. Recently discovered remnants of George Mason’s original viewing “mounts” have been reconstructed and enable visitors to survey the panoramic view of open fields, woodlands, and river stretching toward the south. Please refer to the Archaeology section for more information.

Landing Road

Located on the eastern edge of the garden, the Landing Road leads visitors down an 18th-century roadway set in a gently sloping ravine, across the floor of the Deer Park, and to a stream bank edge offering a commanding view of the Potomac and distant Maryland shore.

Deer Park & Barn Wharf Trail

Past the regular garden is the expansive deer park in which Mason originally kept a fenced-in herd of deer. Visitors can walk through the deer park and also hike the marked Barn Wharf Trail. A leisurely 30-minute walk, the trail leads visitors to the shores of the Potomac River, used by Mason and other planters as a route for receiving and shipping goods and for personal transportation.

Meadow & Burying Ground

To the right of the mansion is a placid meadow. Adjacent to the meadow is a lane of Cedar trees leading to the Mason family burying ground. Buried there are Mason, his first wife Ann, several of their children, and other relatives.

Herb Garden

Herbs were used in the 18th century to flavor food, cure illnesses, scent linens and clothes, repel insects, and perfume skin. Gunston Hall has its own demonstration herb garden which supplies herbs for open-hearth cooking demonstrations throughout the year. This sample garden is used as a teaching tool only, as there is not documentary evidence to confirm the existence of 18th-century herb gardens in Virginia.

Slavery & Outbuildings

In July, 1773, Mason wrote, “. . . that slow Poison [slavery]. . . is daily contaminating the Minds & Morals of our People. Every Gentlemen here is born a petty Tyrant. Practiced in the Acts of Despotism & Cruelty, we become callous to the Dictates of Humanity, & all the finer feelings of the Soul. Taught to regard a part of our own Species in the most abject & contemptible Degree below us, we lose that Idea of the dignity of Man which the Hand of Nature had implanted in us, for great & useful purposes.” Mason spoke out against the slave trade and fought, unsuccessfully, to have the importation of slaves abolished in the *Constitution*.

While Mason publicly opposed slavery on an intellectual level, there is no documentation of his having freed any of his slaves. He owned a large number of slaves throughout his life; documents record approximately 90 at Gunston Hall in 1782. Slaves represented a large portion of Mason’s wealth and economic security for himself and, perhaps more importantly, for his large family. Like many of his contemporaries, Mason could not devise a means to end slavery which would also ensure prosperity for plantation owners who depended on slave labor.

Keeping slaves was contrary to the individual freedoms Mason so vehemently espoused, a fact that has not gone unnoticed by staff at this historic site. Gunston Hall wants the public to understand the entire plantation community, of which slaves comprised the majority. There are programs, special tours, audio interpretations

and mini-exhibits that explore the daily lives of Mason's slaves. Future archaeology will attempt to find the exact location of slave cabins and other slave sites at Gunston Hall.

Outbuildings, small reconstructed buildings surrounding the kitchen yard, were areas where domestic slaves would have spent a good deal of time. Outbuildings include a kitchen, dairy, laundry, and smokehouse. Visitors take self-guided tours of these buildings, some of which have interpretive panels and audio messages. A reconstructed schoolhouse, with teacher's quarters upstairs, also may be toured by visitors.

Archaeology

The mission of the Archaeology Department is to locate, assess, and excavate archaeological sites buried across the plantation's remaining 550 acres.

The archaeology staff is currently investigating Mason's original "regular" garden and landscape, a project which has been ongoing since the inception of the department in 1997. The current grounds bear little resemblance to what existed in the 18th century (more information can be found on the "Gardens & Grounds" page), and Gunston Hall is incrementally removing the remains of a mid-20th century colonial revival garden and creating a landscape similar to what Mason would have had. The objective of the current archaeological excavations is to supply information to facilitate this refurbishment. Excavation investigations have yielded a vast array of artifacts and original features including several fencepost holes, paths, and planting bed outlines from Mason's time. Five pebble paths, which define the four quadrants of the garden, were recreated in 2004-05. Recent findings include what are most probably the original wharf area on the Potomac River and the "Landing Road", discovered through a collaboration of archaeology, old documents and photographs, and the now-published "Recollections" of John Mason, George Mason's fourth son. The Landing Road and several related paths were cleared and available for foot traffic in late 2005. In 2011, the Archaeology team spread their investigation to the landfront side of the Mansion, searching for evidence of a carriage circle and further investigating the original carriage road and ditched fence line discovered near the plantation's current entrance. In 2013, a ground penetrating radar exploration of an area just north of the mansion discovered the family burying ground at the site of Newtown, an early Mason property that is among the oldest in the county. Fifteen graves were found, and George Mason III is suspected to be among the family members interred in these unmarked graves, as well as the documented burial site of George IV's infant son William.

The archaeology staff works in the field from April through October, weather permitting. The remainder of the year finds staff and volunteers in the archaeology laboratory, where they research, clean and catalogue artifacts.

Special events pertaining to archaeology are held at Gunston Hall annually. Please reference the Calendar of Events for upcoming programs.

Library & Archives

Gunston Hall's library features over 5,000 modern reference books along with a rare book collection of more than 1,300 titles. Materials do not circulate and are not available through interlibrary loan. A library and archives brochure is available upon request. The library is open by appointment on weekdays from 9:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Call Gunston Hall's librarian to make an appointment at 703-550-9220 or email library@gunstonhall.org.

The main focus of the modern reference collection is on the life of George Mason (1725-1792) and the 18th-century world. The subjects include 17th- and 18th-century Virginia and Chesapeake history, decorative arts, architecture, cookery, slavery, human rights, and constitutional studies.

The rare book collection concentrates on subjects of interest to an 18th-century plantation owner and features books which may help interpret his world. Its strengths are in architecture, domestic management, horticulture, husbandry, and agriculture. A considerable portion of this collection replicates the library of George Mason's uncle, John Mercer, where Mason frequently studied.

In addition to the book collections, the library has extensive research files and a small historical manuscript collection focusing on George Mason, the Mason family and owners of Gunston Hall.

Tours & Events

Regular Tours

Gunston Hall is open daily for tours from 9:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Tours are offered on the half hour with the last tour taking place at 4:30 p.m. Visitors take a guided tour of the mansion and are able to explore the outbuildings, gardens and grounds on their own. The guided tour portion lasts approximately 30 minutes, and it is recommended that visitors allow at least 1.5 hours for their visit. Reservations are requested for groups of ten or more. Admission fees are \$10 for adults, \$8 for seniors and groups, \$5 for children ages 6-18, and free for children under age six.

Theme Tours

Special tours exploring different aspects of life on the plantation are offered from April through October. Theme tours include *Architecture in the Afternoon*, *Gunston Hall Conversations (with living history characters)*, *Plantation Sleuth*, *Nature Walks*, and *Hunting for George Mason's Garden Landscape Tours*. Please refer to the Calendar of Events for current offerings.

Group Tours

Groups of ten or more are requested to make a reservation for touring Gunston Hall, and regular group tours are discounted to \$8 per person. Breakfast, tea, lunch, or dinner may be pre-arranged for groups by calling 703/550-9220. Customized (theme) tours or living history characters are available for an additional fee.

School Tours

Gunston Hall's interactive programming complements and enhances the Virginia Standards of Learning with a choice of offerings for both elementary and secondary school students. Tours last 1.5 to 2 hours, depending on the age of participants, and cost \$5 per student. Advance reservations are required for these popular tours.

Events

Special events and activities take place throughout the year. Offering family-friendly programming, academic symposia, teacher workshops, lectures, summer camp, scout offerings and seasonal events, Gunston Hall has something for everyone. Please see the enclosed Calendar of Events for more information.

Virginia Declaration of Rights

George Mason's most significant contribution to individual rights and personal liberty can be found in the *Virginia Declaration of Rights*. Written at the Virginia Convention in 1776, Mason drew from Enlightenment philosopher John Locke, among others, and pronounced "That all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights . . . among which are the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety." This document was the first in America to call for freedom of the press, tolerance of religion, proscription of unreasonable searches, and the right to a fair and speedy trial.

Wary of giving the government power that could encroach on an individual's right to what he saw as basic liberties, Mason championed personal freedoms tirelessly in both the Virginia and Constitutional conventions, an effort recognized by other Founding Fathers. Thomas Jefferson in 1825 said, "The fact is unquestionable, that the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution of Virginia, were drawn originally by George Mason, one of our really great men, and of the first order of greatness."

Mason's *Virginia Declaration of Rights* influenced the *Declaration of Independence*, the *U.S. Bill of Rights*, France's *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, and the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Rights*. The international influence of Mason's ideals was remarked upon by the Marquis de Condorcet in Paris circa 1788: "The first declaration of rights which truly deserves the name is that of Virginia . . . and its author is entitled to the eternal gratitude of mankind."

Mason and the sentiments of the *Virginia Declaration of Rights* were commemorated on the National Mall in 2002. A project more than ten years in the making, the George Mason Memorial honors Mason's contributions to human rights and to the founding of our country.

George Mason National Memorial

The George Mason National Memorial was dedicated on April 9, 2002 in a ceremony featuring Chief Justice of the United States William H. Rehnquist. The first memorial on the National Mall to commemorate an individual who did not serve as president, the site consists of a larger-than-life bronze sculpture, stone walls bearing Mason's words, trellis, fountain, and garden. It is located near the Tidal Basin and the Jefferson Memorial.

Designed by landscape architect Faye Harwell of Rhodesside & Harwell, Inc., the Memorial's centerpiece is a seated sculpture of Mason, designed and created by sculptor Wendy M. Ross. The stone walls surrounding the sculpture feature hand-carved words written by Mason and others, like Thomas Jefferson, who have lauded his contributions to the founding of our country and to human rights.

Prominently featuring a garden with historic character - most plants were selected because they existed in the 18th century - the George Mason National Memorial is different from the traditional marble monuments on the Mall. In an excellent example of landscape preservation, the Memorial refreshes previous green space by integrating commemorative statuary and engraved stone walls into an existing garden.

Historic Quotes About George Mason

“Too few Americans realize the vast debt we owe [George Mason]. His immortal *Declaration of Rights* in 1776 was one of the finest and loftiest creations ever struck from the mind of man. George Mason it was who first gave concrete expression to those inalienable human rights that belong to every American citizen and that are today the bedrock of our democracy. Our matchless *Bill of Rights* came directly from the amazing wisdom and far-seeing vision of this patriot. Those first ten amendments to our Constitution, which we call our Bill of Rights, were based on George Mason’s great Declaration of Rights. That is why I say that George Mason will forever hold a special place in our hearts. I sincerely hope that his home, Gunston Hall, will in time become a symbol of the rights of man and a mecca for all liberty-loving Americans.”

President Harry S. Truman in a letter to Edward Boykin, October 5, 1949.

My first acquaintance with him was in the convention of Va. of 1776. . . Being young and inexperienced I had of course but little agency in those proceedings. I retained however a perfect impression that he was a leading champion for the Instruction (for independence); that he was the author for the Declaration [Virginia Declaration of Rights] as originally drawn, and with very slight variations adopted; and that he was the Master Builder of the [Virginia] Constitution, & its main expositor & supporter throughout the discussion. . .

The public situation in which I had the best opportunity of being acquainted with the genius, the opinions & the public labours of your grandfather was that of our co-service in the Convention of 1787. . . none who differed from him on some points will deny that he sustained throughout the proceedings of the body the high character of a powerful Reasoner, a profound Statesman and a devoted republican.

My private intercourse with him was chiefly on occasional visits to Gunston when journeying to & fro from the North, in which his conversations were always a feast to me.

James Madison in a letter to George Mason VI, 1827.

I had many occasional and strenuous coadjutors in debate, and one most steadfast, able and zealous; who was himself a host. This was George Mason, a man of the first order of wisdom among those who acted on the theatre of the revolution, of expansive mind, profound judgment, cogent in argument, learned in the lore of our former constitution, and earnest for the republican change on democratic principles. His elocution was neither flowing nor smooth; but his language was strong, his manner most impressive, and strengthened by a dash of biting cynicism, when provocation made it seasonable.

Thomas Jefferson *Autobiography*, 1821.

The first declaration of rights which truly deserves the name is that of Virginia . . . and its author is entitled to the eternal gratitude of mankind.

Marquis De Condorcet, Paris, 1789

Nearby Attractions

Mason Neck Attractions

Mason Neck is an 8,000-acre peninsula on the Potomac River. Gunston Hall and four wildlife parks publicly preserve over half of the acreage of this rural retreat in the northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C.

Mason Neck State Park: Located 1.5 miles from Gunston Hall, this state park is situated on a peninsula formed by Pohick Bay on the north, Belmont Bay on the south, and the Potomac River on the east. In addition to bald eagles, the park attracts a variety of other birds and is the site of an active heron rookery. Trails, fishing, and interpretive programs are available. A staffed Visitor Center features hands-on activities and exhibits. 703/550-0960 or 703/550-0362 (Visitor Center).

Elizabeth Hartwell Mason Neck Wildlife Refuge: The first National Wildlife Refuge specifically established for the endangered bald eagle (1969), this 2,277-acre refuge encompasses approximately 2,000 acres of mature hardwood forest, the largest freshwater marsh in northern Virginia, and nearly six miles of shoreline. The refuge connects to the state park. Trails and public programs are available. 703/690-1297

Pohick Bay Regional Park and Golf Course: Located less than a mile from Gunston Hall, this park has a golf course, miniature golf course, campground, boat rentals, swimming pool, nature trails, bridle trails, and picnic areas with grills. Camp Center: 703/339-6104. Pool: 703/339-6102. Golf Course: 703/339-8585.

Other Area Attractions

Woodlawn Plantation: Located approximately 8 miles north of Gunston Hall on Route 1, this 1805 house was given by George Washington to Nelly Custis, a granddaughter of Martha Washington, and her husband. On the plantation's grounds is Frank Lloyd Wright's Pope-Leighey House. Both properties are owned and operated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. 703/780-4000.

Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens: Home of George Washington, Mount Vernon is approximately 12 miles north of Gunston Hall on the George Washington Memorial Parkway. 703/780-2000.

Alexandria, Virginia: This historic and charming seaport, founded in 1749 on the Potomac River, features many restaurants, boutiques, and smaller museums. Located 16 miles from Gunston Hall. The Alexandria Convention and Visitors Association can be reached at 703/838-4200.

Washington, D.C: Located 20 miles north of Gunston Hall via I-95. The Washington Convention and Tourism Corporation can be reached at 202/289-7000.

Historic Occoquan, Virginia: Site of the first automated grist mill in the country, Occoquan is a quaint town with boutiques and restaurants. Located one exit south from Gunston Hall on I-95. The Prince William County Visitor Center in Occoquan can be reached at 703/491-4045.