

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE PRESENTATION OF SLAVERY AT MOUNT
VERNON: POWER, PRIVILEGE, AND HISTORICAL
TRUTH

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Although the labor of enslaved Africans and Black Americans played a large part in the history of colonial America, the presentation of slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens is, for the most part, incomplete and leaves visitors with an inaccurate impression of the reality of slavery. This research utilizes questionnaires completed by visitors on-site and field observations of various historical interpretations at Mount Vernon to answer two major research questions: (1) How is slavery portrayed at Mount Vernon? and (2) To what degree are visitors critical of the story of slavery told at Mount Vernon? The results indicated that the presentation of slavery is inconsistent and that the history of slaves at Mount Vernon is marginalized and easily avoided by most visitors. Most visitors, regardless of their racial background, are not overly critical of the presentation of slavery at Mount Vernon. Non-White visitors and Slave Life Tour participants were slightly more likely than White visitors who did not take the Slave Life Tour to give answers indicating some degree of criticism of the presentation of slavery at Mount Vernon.

THE PRESENTATION OF SLAVERY AT MOUNT VERNON:
POWER, PRIVILEGE, AND HISTORICAL TRUTH

by

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Chapter 1

Why Mount Vernon?

Introduction

The victors usually write history, but in the case of the Civil War, the Southern interpretation of the antebellum south (which discredits abolitionists and downplays injustice) has become the commonly accepted interpretation (Rhea 1997: 95). In my preliminary research, which included observations of three historical sites and plantations (Mount Vernon, Colonial Williamsburg, Monticello), I concluded that the representation of the lives of enslaved Black Americans at these landmarks could be improved. Although the labor of enslaved Africans and Black Americans played a large part in the history of colonial America, the presentation of slavery is, for the most part, incomplete, inaccurate, and at times absent altogether.

The focus of this research is the presentation of slavery at Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington. From questionnaires completed by visitors on-site and field observations of the various historical interpretations at Mount Vernon, I aim to address the following research questions:

1. How is slavery portrayed at Mount Vernon?
2. To what degree are visitors critical of the story of slavery told at and about Mount Vernon?

In addition to assessing the degree to which visitors are critical of the portrayal of slavery at Mount Vernon, this research seeks to determine which, if any, of the existing racial theories adequately explain Mount Vernon's portrayal of race as it relates to

slavery at the home of George Washington. Existing racial theories are elaborated in the Literature Review.

A Brief Note on Mount Vernon as a Historical Site

The official website of George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens provides a wealth of general information about the plantation, its history, and visitor attractions. George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens is privately owned and operated by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, a private, non-profit organization established in 1853. The Association is an all-female organization with representatives from over thirty states and is the oldest national historic preservation association in the United States. Twice annually, a Board of Advisors composed of "prominent citizens" from across the country meets to provide input on the governance of the site (<http://www.mountvernon.org/contact/>).

Mount Vernon is located in Northern Virginia on the banks of the Potomac River, sixteen miles south of Washington, DC. It is the only national historic site in the United States open to visitors 365 days a year. Mount Vernon is a popular tourist spot; over one million people visited Mount Vernon in 1999. The original estate was over eight thousand acres, however approximately five hundred acres have been preserved. The site is restored to resemble the appearance of the plantation in its original time period. Attractions at the site include the mansion tour, a self-guided audio tour, gardens, a gift shop, a formal restaurant, casual eateries, a seasonal slave life tour, a garden and landscape tour, a tomb tribute, a farm tour, a sightseeing cruise, as well as numerous special events throughout the year (<http://www.mountvernon.org/contact/>).

Preserving the History of Mount Vernon Slaves

Some effort is made to preserve the history of the enslaved Blacks who lived at Mount Vernon. A slave life tour, offered three times daily from April through October, provides visitors with a historical interpretation of the daily lives of slaves as well as anecdotes about select Mount Vernon slaves. During Black History Month, Mount Vernon interpreters stationed at the slave quarters highlight the lives and contributions of the slaves who lived and worked at Mount Vernon. During this month there is a daily wreath laying and brief presentation at the Slave Memorial site. On Saturdays and Sundays during Black History Month, visitors may attend an interactive program of colonial slave life music, singing, and storytelling about slave history (www.mountvernon.org/calendar).

Remembering Slavery While Maintaining the Image of an American Icon

George Washington was a slave owner. However, as the first President of the United States he holds a sacred place in the minds of many Americans, thus making any criticism of his moral character controversial. The official website for Mount Vernon describes George Washington's attitude toward slavery:

“Although George Washington was born into a world where slavery was accepted, his attitude changed as he grew older... By the time of his presidency, Washington seems to have believed that slavery was wrong and against the principles of the new nation... Washington did not lead a public fight against slavery as president, however, because he believed it would tear the new nation apart... He had worked too hard to build the country to risk tearing it apart... Privately, Washington could lead by example. In his will, George Washington made arrangements for all the slaves he owned to be freed after his death (123 of the 316 slaves living at Mount Vernon belonged to George Washington).” (<http://www.mountvernon.org/education/slavery/attitude.asp>)

From my preliminary observations, I concluded that Mount Vernon's historical interpreters admit that Washington owned slaves, but they downplay the moral issues

involved with being a slave owner. His ownership of slaves is excused because they claim he was following the norm of men in his social class and he did not want to create divisions within the newly formed nation. Historical interpreters at Mount Vernon make it a priority to stress that George Washington freed his slaves after his death. However, Washington never took a public stance against slavery at any point during his life, including during his presidency.

The overwhelming majority of Mount Vernon visitors are White. Occasionally a small group of Asian, Latino, or Black visitors may be found at the site. In addition, the vast majority of Mount Vernon employees are white as well, including every tour guide that I witnessed conducting the slave life tour.

Chapter 2

Slavery at Mount Vernon

A wealth of information is available on the life of George Washington and his family. However, many scholars have found that gathering accurate information about the daily lives of the slaves at Mount Vernon is a more complicated task (Thompson 1999, Pogue 2002, Pogue 1991). Modern scholars studying the enslaved Black community at Mount Vernon rely heavily on secondary sources such as Washington's 1786 and 1799 censuses of his slaves, court records, archaeological artifacts, and account books in order to gain some insight into the everyday lives of Mount Vernon slaves (Thompson 1999).

Although The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association's presentation of slavery at Mount Vernon focuses almost exclusively on the lives of the slaves who resided at Mansion House Farm, the area located closest to George Washington's mansion, the vast majority of Mount Vernon slaves were unskilled farm workers who resided on several outlying farms, miles away from the mansion. Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens is five hundred acres, which is considerably smaller than the size of the estate at the time of Washington's death in 1799. At the height of its productivity, Mount Vernon consisted of eight thousand acres divided into five farms: Mansion House, Dogue Run, Union, Muddy Hole, and River. Each individual farm contained a separate village of both African and Virginia-born slaves (Thompson 1999: 179).

Most modern visitors to Mount Vernon are presented with a picture of slavery which reflects the daily lives of slaves at the Mansion House Farm. Although this was the largest slave community, with approximately 90 people, it is not representative of the

lifestyle of other slaves who lived out outlying farms. Mansion House Farm was only one of five farms at Mount Vernon. Mansion House slaves were largely a skilled group consisting of bricklayers, cooks, carpenters, dairy maids, millers, distillers, gardeners, wagon and cart drivers, butlers, and maids (Thompson 1999). Slaves at Mansion House Farm mainly resided in substantial brick buildings, one of which is part of the modern-day Slave Life Tour. These buildings held up to sixty people in a barracks-style configuration (Pogue 2002: 4).

The four other farms of the Mount Vernon estate were Union with 76 slaves, River with 57 slaves, Dogue Run with 45 slaves, and Muddy Hole with 41 slaves (Thompson 1999: 180). Residents at the outlying farms were mainly unskilled farm workers. Living quarters for slaves on outlying farms were generally of lower quality than those of Mansion House Farm slaves. These slaves mainly resided in groups of twelve in small wooden cabins or larger wooden structures referred to as “quarters”. There is no documentation on the precise size of these domiciles, but archaeologists speculate that the size of cabins on outlying farms could have been as small as 16 by 12 feet to 16 by 14 feet, or approximately 224 square feet (Pogue 2002: 4-5, 15).

All Mount Vernon slaves were given modest rations of food that included pork, cornmeal, some vegetables and small quantities of salted fish. There is some archaeological evidence that slaves at Mansion House Farm had a slightly better diet than those on outlying farms. Some slaves had gardens and raised chickens for their own consumption. Many slaves engaged in various moneymaking activities to earn money to improve their diet (Pogue 1991).

Regardless of location at Mount Vernon, nearly all slaves engaged in activities to earn income for small luxuries to raise their standard of living, such as extra clothing and food. Some slaves received tips for special services, such as helping one of Washington's guests who was ill or disabled. Many slaves participated in the Sunday market in Alexandria where slaves were allowed to buy, sell and trade goods every Sunday morning before 9:00 a.m. Although the journey from Mount Vernon to Alexandria took nearly two hours on horseback or three hours on foot, it was a rare opportunity for slaves to earn extra income by selling produce and chickens as well as enjoy fellowship with slaves from other plantations. George Washington himself also occasionally purchased goods such as chickens, ducks, eggs, melons, cucumbers, and honey from his slaves. Some slaves made extra income by selling leftovers from the kitchen or even selling their teeth to dentists, which was common practice during the time. While slaves were able to earn a limited amount of income without much interference from Washington, he disapproved of any activities that interfered with production on his farm and was known to severely punish any slave whose moneymaking interfered with Mount Vernon's daily operations (Thompson 1999: 180-184).

Slaves had minimal time for social activities, but there is some evidence that they occasionally were afforded time to engage in recreation. It was common for slaves to visit each other at night after the day's work was through. Washington disapproved of this activity, which he referred to as "night walking", because he felt it left slaves too sleep-deprived to work hard during daylight hours. Since Sundays were free days to every slave except house servants, this was the day reserved for visiting friends and family on other plantations. Archaeological evidence suggests that such visits included

music, storytelling, and smoking. Occasionally some slaves were given permission to attend special sporting events, such as horse races and others may have been invited to Washington family celebrations as guests, not servants (Thompson 1999: 184-188).

Historical and archaeological evidence provides modern researchers with some insight into the everyday lives of slaves at Mount Vernon, but many questions are unanswered since there are few written records. It is notable that the modern presentation of Mount Vernon slave life relies solely on the lives of slaves at Mansion House Farm, the largest farm with the most skilled workers and located in close proximity to the Washington family mansion. Modern visitors to Mount Vernon can only speculate about the living conditions of less skilled workers on outlying farms that are not showcased on modern tours.

Chapter 3

Portraying Slavery at Historical Sites

Slavery: Reality vs. Historical Presentation

“Our histories tend to discuss American slavery so impartially, that in the end nobody seems to have done wrong and everybody was right. Slavery appears to have been thrust upon unwilling helpless America, while the South was blameless in becoming its center.”

-W.E.B. DuBois (Dubois 1962: 714)

The inclusion of African American history in academic curriculum is a relatively new phenomenon. Prior to 1960, not one major museum of Black History existed (Rhea 1997: 98). In Lies My Teacher Told Me, James Loewen examined several historical mistruths commonly taught to American students, including common misperceptions about American slavery. Loewen conducted a thorough examination of American textbooks and noted that prior to 1970, most American textbooks provided students with a mild description of slavery, one that downplayed physical and psychological violence and attributed the Civil War to a variety of factors unrelated to slavery. After the Civil Rights Movement textbook publishers began making efforts to provide a realistic portrayal of slavery, however this portrayal leaves much to be desired. Textbooks generally portray America as a nation always moving in a positive direction and explain slavery as a temporary injustice, not a historical atrocity with long-term implications for American society (Loewen 1995: 142-143).

Loewen concluded that slavery is a complicated historical issue and in order to portray it accurately, textbook authors would need to attribute the institution of slavery to two interrelated historical events: (1) taking land from indigenous people and (2) forcing enslaved Africans to labor on that land. This type of portrayal would require a

connection to be made between slavery as an economic system and racism as a system of ideas, or the relationship between social structure and superstructure. Instead, most textbooks do not make the connection between these crucial historical events and as a result their portrayal of slavery is incomplete and somewhat simplistic. Textbooks do not connect history to racism, which is a fault since demonstrating this connection would give students an insight into the causes of racism and its perpetuation as well as encourage students to think critically about how racism can be eliminated in the future (Loewen 1995: 143-145).

As a result of the light treatment of slavery in American textbooks, many Americans hold misperceptions about slavery. Many children are surprised to learn that both Thomas Jefferson and George Washington were slave owners. Although it is situated in the plantation South, many visitors are surprised to learn that slavery existed in Colonial Williamsburg. Many people are unaware that slavery existed in the North as well as the South and are surprised to learn that Massachusetts was the first colony to legalize slavery. In 1720, over twenty percent of the population of New York City was Black and many of these Blacks were enslaved (Loewen 1995: 142). Historians also face difficulties in re-creating the lived experiences of African Americans at historical sites.

Historical Sites: Re-Creating an Experience

“The Negro knows practically nothing of his history and his ‘friends’ are not permitting him to learn it... And if a race has no history, if it has no worth-while tradition, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of extermination.”

-Historian Carter Wilson at the founding of Negro History Week (now Black History Month) in 1926 (Wiggins 1990:45)

Most of the information on slave life that is cited by contemporary historians comes from a variety of sources including plantation records, first-hand accounts, slave autobiographies, and narratives gathered by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a majority-White organization of interviewers who paid their subjects for historical insights. These sources are the most accurate available in modern times, however there are some complications involved in this type of historical interpretation. Plantation records reflect the views of White landowners. First-hand accounts were typically written by White abolitionists, and the few accounts that were written by slaves are not representative of the entire slave population, since only an elite group of slaves was literate. In actuality, there are no primary sources written by enslaved Blacks for enslaved Blacks without the intention of being presented to a White audience (Fountain 1995: 67).

John Hope Franklin, an African American historian, has made significant contributions to the body of literature on the reality of slavery, particularly the lives of runaway slaves. In Runaway Slaves (1999) he refutes the historical trend of portraying slaves as complacent, timid, and childlike by examining the reality of runaways. The book is an extensive examination of “slave flight” between 1790 and 1860 in addition to the motives of slaveholders and other Whites. His research is based on anecdotes from slaves as well as historical records maintained by various Southern states during the time period. This work is significant and unique in that it examines the motives and realities of running away from the perspectives of slaves themselves.

Anthropologists and historians stress the importance of the inclusion of the African American perspective in the presentation of slavery at historical sites (Fountain

1995, Singleton 1995, Gable, Handler, and Lawson 1992). Eric Gable, Richard Handler, and Anna Lawson's article "On the uses of relativism: Fact, conjecture, and Black and White histories at Colonial Williamsburg" discusses the inclusion of African American historical perspectives in attractions at Colonial Williamsburg. Many visitors are unaware that half of the population of Colonial Williamsburg was Black (often referred to as "the other half"). In the early 1980s an all-Black Department of African-American Interpretation and Presentation (AAIP) was created in order to ensure the accurate inclusion of the African American perspective at Colonial Williamsburg. The researchers found that although African Americans are included in the exhibits at Colonial Williamsburg, their histories are perceived to be more interpretative as opposed to the assumption that the histories of White residents are factual (Gable, Handler, and Lawson 1992).

The limited quantity of first-hand accounts of slavery contributes to the inaccuracy of its presentation at historical sites such as Mount Vernon. Existing racial theories can help in the identification of the causes and type of deficiencies at these historical sites.

Chapter 4

Slavery and Racial Theory

The institution of slavery in the United States was different than that of any other nation because unlike previous types of slavery American slavery was dependent on race (Loewen 1995: 143). The enslavement of generations of Black people in the United States was justified by the belief that people of African decent were biologically inferior to those of European decent. Although the institution of American slavery was based on racial divisions, race is not often examined as a primary factor in its historical presentation.

There are four major categories of classical theories used to explain the formation of racial differences: *social Darwinism*, *ethnicity-based*, *class-based*, and *nation-based*. These categories do not encompass all of the possible views on race. However, they do outline and include the major themes present in social science research. Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that social Darwinism, ethnicity-based, class-based, and nation-based approaches to race are not adequate because they ignore the fact that race is significant in and of itself. Omi and Winant's major goal is to elaborate on the existing range of racial theory (Omi and Winant 1994: 10-12).

In addition to the classical theories, there are new approaches to the study of race. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's Colorblind Racism considers White Americans' denial of the significance of race as a form of racism. Bonilla-Silva explains the power structures in the United States that allow Whites to disguise racist thoughts as arguments for equality, meritocracy, and liberalism (2003).

The consideration of racial theory is central in the study of the portrayal of slavery and the following theories serve as a conceptual framework for assessing the portrayal of slavery at Mount Vernon.

Social Darwinism and Biological Theories

Social Darwinism, a type of biological theory, arose after the abolishment of slavery as a way of justifying beliefs of racial inferiority. This perspective equates race with specific hereditary characteristics and attributed differences in intelligence, temperament, sexuality, and other traits to racial differences. Whites are considered the superior race and all other races are viewed as inferior genetic mutations to the “norm”. This theory deems racial intermixture especially problematic because it could result in a ‘biological throwback’, thus contaminating the White race. These theories lost prominence in the early 1900s when they were challenged by Progressivism and the “Chicago school” of sociology, both of whom embraced an ethnicity-based perspective (Omi and Winant 1994: 14-15).

Biological theories, although highly criticized, are still utilized by some scholars. Sociobiological theories operate on the basic principle that genes, not the individual person, are the units of natural selection. The actual person is viewed only as a host for genes and these genes are characterized as “selfish” and are solely motivated to remain in the gene pool (Turner and Maryanski 1993).

Peter van der Berghe (1981) is a powerful advocate of sociobiology. He and most other sociobiologists believe that social structures are only present for the purpose of maintaining the fitness of genes. van der Berghe identified societal characteristics that he believes exist primarily for the purpose of gene preservation. Among these

characteristics are *kin selection* or *inclusive fitness* and *reciprocal fitness*. Kin selection, or inclusive fitness, is a means by which people maximize their fitness by keeping as much genetic material as possible in their gene pool. This is achieved by showing a preference for blood relatives as opposed to non-family. Reciprocal altruism explains that people help those who are not related to them mainly because they believe that they may need to obtain resources from these individuals in the future, so ultimately their purpose remains to enhance their own gene pool.

Human ecology theories also fall under the category of biological racial theories and Susan Olzak (1986,1992) is a well-known researcher in this area. Her theory explains that violence between immigrants and the dominant population, particularly violence directed toward the immigrants by the dominant population, occurs when immigrants move into the societal niches held by the dominant population. The greater the feeling of threat perceived by the dominant population, the greater the level of violence against the subordinate population. This theory has been used to explain how dominant populations have fought both ethnic Whites and African Americans in an attempt to preserve their societal position.

Ethnicity-Based Theories

Over the past fifty years, ethnicity-based theories have been the dominant paradigm used to describe United States race relations. There are three major stages of ethnicity-based theories: (1) the pre 1930s stage during which the ethnic group view rose as a challenge to earlier biologicistic (and implicitly racist) views; (2) a stage from 1930 to 1965 during which it gained support from liberals and the two recurrent themes- assimilationism and cultural pluralism-were defined; and (3) a post-1965 phase when the

paradigm acted as a way to protect the political views of conservative egalitarians (Omi and Winant 1994: 14).

Ethnicity-based theories suggest that race is a social category that should be viewed as one, among many, determinants of a person's ethnicity. Ethnicity is understood to be the result of a process of group formation based on culture and decent. "Culture" refers to religion, language, "customs", nationality, and political identification. "Decent" refers to a common sense of group origins and heredity, which is nearly biological in character (Omi and Winant 1994: 15).

Two major subgroups of ethnicity-based theories dominate: assimilationist and pluralist. Robert Park, an assimilationist, was one of the earliest American theorists on ethnic relations and viewed assimilation as "a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them into a common cultural life" (Park and Burgess 1924: 735). Assimilationists believe that all ethnic groups should strive to adopt the dominant culture while pluralists believe that ethnic groups should and can peacefully coexist while maintaining their individual identities. Park identified distinct stages of assimilation. After initial contact among diverse ethnic groups a *competitive phase* occurs, during which ethnic groups compete for scarce resources such as jobs, neighborhoods, and political representation. During the unstable *accommodation* stage, ethnic groups are forced to change and adapt to their new society, even if that means giving up their own culture and relegating themselves to a lower social position than members of the host society. Park believed that ultimately all ethnic groups would achieve assimilation (Park 1950).

Milton Gordon elaborated on assimilation theories by explaining the different types of assimilation, including *cultural, structural, marital, identification, attitude-receptional, behavioral-receptional*, and *civic* (Gordon 1964). Gordon acknowledges that a few ethnic groups, such as African Americans and Native Americans, have been slow to assimilate, however, he believes that even these groups will eventually become assimilated (Gordon 1981).

Pluralists do not completely deny assimilation, however they do assert that ethnicity remains a powerful force as individual groups adjust to the dominant society. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan (1970) were among the first social scientists to emphasize the tendency of White ethnic groups to retain residential, behavioral, and cultural patterns, even though they appeared assimilated. Andrew Greeley (1971, 1974) is a strong advocate of ethnogenesis, a term used to describe the process of creating a distinct identity as a coping mechanism to deal with discrimination.

Omi and Winant criticize that ethnicity theories do not adequately explain the experiences of Black Americans because they never account for the group's collective experience of historical discrimination rooted in the institution of slavery. These theories group Blacks into a mono-ethnic category with no room for ethnic distinctions (21-23).

Class-Based Theories

Class-based theories explain race by referring to economic structures and processes and view the root of racial differences as the creation and use of material resources (Omi and Winant 1994: 24). According to Stuart Hall, the class paradigm includes those approaches that assume that social differences that appear to have a racial

and ethnic character can actually be explained by peoples' positions in the economic structure (Hall 1980: 306).

There are three major approaches to class-based theories: the market relations approach, the stratification approach, and the class conflict approach. The market relations approach arose during the 1950s and 1960s when researchers recognized that existing market-based economic models were unable to explain racial discrimination. Out of this realization came the identification of three sources of disruption to market equilibrium: irrational prejudice or a "taste for discrimination", monopolistic practices that granted privileges to specific groups, and disruptive state interventionism, which explained that inequality is in the interest of some, but not all Whites (Becker 1957, Thurow 1969, Williams 1982).

W. Lloyd Warner and colleagues describe United States Black-White relations as a caste system in which Blacks are confined to the lowest socioeconomic positions, denied access to power, not permitted to intermarry with other racial groups, and forced to live in segregated housing areas. For this reason, African-Americans may be described as an underclass who occupy a low caste position in society (Warner 1941, Warner and Srole 1945).

Oliver C. Cox (1948) applied Marxian principles to racial class theories in his emphasis of the capitalist system consisting of owners and managers rooted in the institution of slavery. The exploitative institution of slavery was a result of the capitalist practice of stealing Africans from their homeland and selling them to labor on southern plantations. This system of exploitation led to stereotypes and other prejudiced beliefs.

Nation-Based Theories

Nation-based theories attribute racial differences to national, rather than racial, oppression. National differences are rooted in the colonial practice of dividing the world into two hemispheres: the Northern, considered superior and the Southern, considered uncivilized and inferior. Of the previously mentioned theoretical approaches, nation-based theories are the most comprehensive because they consider historical, ethnic, and political factors. Within the nation-based paradigm, race relations are understood as products of colonialism that result in global outcomes (Omi and Winant 1994: 36-37).

Robert Blauner (1969: 396) outlined the four components of *colonization complex*. These components include (1) forced entry into a territory and its population, (2) alteration or destruction of indigenous culture, (3) domination of the indigenous population by the invading society, and (4) justification of such domination by utilizing prejudicial and racist stereotyping.

Colonization complex has also been expanded to explain *internal colonization*, which occurs when subpopulations within a society are dominated by other populations in society. Examples include the control that White Americans exercise over economic, political, and educational resources compared to African Americans and the former system South African apartheid (Blauner 1969, 1972).

Omi and Winant identified several advantages to the nation-based paradigm. First, it emphasizes several different elements of racial oppression: political disenfranchisement, territorial and institutional segregation, and cultural domination, whereas the other paradigms focus on a limited number of aspects, or in some cases one sole aspect. In addition, recognition of the importance of colonialism is another strength

of this approach. They stressed, however, that nation-based theories can be reduced to minority militance or separatism if the historical and theoretical origins of colonialism are not clearly identified (Omi and Winant 1994: 37).

Racial Formation: The New Approach

Omi and Winant argue that although ethnicity, class, and nation-based theories may have some merit, no single theory adequately explains racial construction. Social Darwinism and biological theories view race as a fixed social category, unaffected by social, political, and historical contexts. Ethnicity, class, and nation theories view race as a byproduct of ethnicity, class, or international factors, but not as an element that is significant in and of itself. Their major criticism is that these theories exhibit an inability to view race as an autonomous category (Omi and Winant 1994: 48-50).

Omi and Winant's theoretical approach, racial formation, is the result of their goal to avoid "utopian" beliefs that race is something that will fade in significance over time. They approach race as "an element of the social structure rather than an irregularity within it... a division of human representation rather than an illusion" (Omi and Winant 1994: 48-50). Thus racial formation is defined as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (55).

Colorblind Racism

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) recently researched a new racial theory, colorblind racism. This is a different approach to the study of race used in the classical theories. In Racism Without Racists he explains that White Americans' denial of the significance of race is itself a form of racism. Bonilla-Silva refers to this phenomenon as "colorblind racism" and it is epitomized statements such as "we don't see color, just people" (1).

Bonilla-Silva explored colorblind racism through interview data collected in the 1997 Survey of Social Attitudes of College Students and the 1998 Detroit Area Study. The data included interviews from a representative sample of White college students from several geographic locations and Black and White residents living in the Detroit area (12-16). As a result of these interviews, Bonilla-Silva identified four distinct frames of colorblind racism: *abstract liberalism*, *naturalization*, *cultural racism*, and *minimization of racism* (26-47).

According to Bonilla-Silva, *abstract liberalism* is both the most difficult to understand and the most important frame of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003: 26). He states, “the frame of *abstract liberalism* involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g. “equal opportunity,” the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g. choice, individualism) in an *abstract* manner to explain racial matters” (28). By using liberalism to frame race-related discussions, Whites are able to rationalize behaviors that in actuality oppose practical approaches to de facto racial inequality. An example of such abstract liberalism is the White American who opposes affirmative action because it gives “preferential treatment” to Blacks, while failing to recognize the historical factors that gave rise racial inequality (28).

In his examination of interview data from the Detroit Area Study (DAS), Bonilla-Silva identified several manifestations of abstract liberalism. The first, he identified as “rationalizing racial unfairness in the name of equal opportunity”. This category included Whites who insisted on equal opportunity without considering the savage inequalities between Whites and Blacks (30-31). The second, he identified as “‘the most qualified...’: a meritocratic way of defending white privilege”. White respondents in this

category blamed racial inequality on a lack of effort on the part of minorities. These respondents believed that the cream will always rise to the top, without considering the fact that the cream is almost always white (32-33). The third, referred to as “‘nothing should be forced on people’: keeping things the way they are” describes the liberal belief that government should have minimal, if any, influence in economic and social matters. These respondents were adamant about government not interfering with people’s personal preferences for associating with their own race (34-35). Finally, “individual choice or an excuse for racial unfairness and racially based choices” is characterized by the belief that individuals are responsible for stopping racism. The problem with this approach is that racism is based on group advantages. Whites, as a group, have advantages over blacks, as a group. Taking an individualized approach to ending racism does not consider the group impact of the issue or its structural barriers (35-36).

Bonilla-Silva describes *naturalization* as “a frame that allows Whites to explain away racial phenomena by suggestion they are natural occurrences” (Bonilla-Silva 2003: 28). This frame allows Whites to justify racial segregation by explaining that Blacks and Whites naturally prefer to be surrounded by their own kind. It also allows Whites to make excuses for segregation by claiming that racial minorities also prefer to stay to themselves, just as Whites do. These thought processes imply that such preferences are biologically driven and not influenced by social or historical factors (28). Naturalization is recognized by the use of the word “natural” or the phrase “that’s the way it is” in description of events or actions that may otherwise be considered racially motivated or racist. Naturalization is not widely recognized by social scientists and was the least used

frame of colorblind racism used by the DAS respondents (only fifteen percent of responses fell into this category) (37).

Cultural racism is described as “a frame that relies on culturally based arguments such as ‘Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education’ or ‘Blacks have too many babies’ to explain the standing of minorities in society” (28). Cultural racism was originally labeled as the “culture of poverty” in the 1960s, however this intellectual tradition has resurfaced in several forms by both Black and White scholars including conservatives Charles Murray (1984) and Lawrence Mead (1986) and radical Cornel West (1993). Bonilla-Silva asserts that when cultural racism is combined with minimization of racism (discussed below), the results are ideologically deadly. Whites who combine these two frames express a disbelief that Blacks face any type of discrimination and claim that Blacks use discrimination as an excuse for their own inherent laziness (40).

Minimization of racism “suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances” (29). People who utilize these types of excuses may claim that Blacks are too racially sensitive, always looking to “play the race card”, or looking to use race as an “excuse”. This frame also involves confining racist behaviors to only those that are overt and obvious, such as Jim Crow segregation, or White supremacist activity (29-30). William Julius Wilson’s The Declining Significance of Race (1978) is an example of an argument utilizing minimization of racism. In this book, Wilson asserts that class, not race, is the central obstacle to Black social mobility. Although many academics embraced this book, Bonilla-Silva found that a high proportion of both Black and White DAS respondents disagreed with the statement

“Discrimination against blacks is no longer a problem in the United States” (82.5 percent of Whites and 89.5 percent of Blacks). However, there was some disagreement between Black and White respondents on the salience of race as a factor in explaining Blacks’ societal position. Only 32.9 percent of Whites “agreed” or “strongly” agreed with the statement “Blacks are in the position that they are today as a group because of present day discrimination (60.5 percent of Blacks agreed). This response indicates that Whites generally believe that discrimination is a problem of the past (43).

Mount Vernon and Racial Theory

The consideration of all of the above racial theories, and specifically colorblind racism, class-based theory and nation-based theory, led to the development of my major research questions.

Chapter 5

Methodology

Research Questions

I developed the following research questions as a result of my preliminary observations:

1. How is slavery portrayed at Mount Vernon?
2. To what degree are visitors critical of the story of slavery told at and about Mount Vernon?

These questions will be examined utilizing the methods discussed in the following section.

Methodology

In order to answer the research question “how is slavery portrayed at Mount Vernon?” I conducted field observations of tours, exhibits, and visitors at Mount Vernon as well as literature provided at and about Mount Vernon. These observations included an analysis of the optional self-guided audio tour entitled “Mount Vernon: A Rural Village”. These unobtrusive observations did not involve any disruption of activities at the site. These observations are elaborated in the Results and Conclusions sections.

In order to answer the question “To what degree are visitors critical of the story of slavery told at or about Mount Vernon?” questionnaire data was collected from Mount Vernon Visitors. The target sample size for questionnaire respondents was at least fifty participants. Prior to collecting any data from visitors, permission was obtained from the Director of Interpretation at Mount Vernon. Prior to completing the questionnaire, participants signed a consent form (Appendix A). The authorities at Mount Vernon were

also provided with a description of the research project and a copy of the questionnaire. The questionnaire included both Likert scale and open ended questions and is designed to be completed in approximately five minutes. Please refer to Appendix B to view the questionnaire. The questionnaire was not intended to deceive participants and asked basic questions in order to gauge the level to which visitors were critical of the inclusion of slave life on the self-guided audio tour and the mansion tour.

Participants for the questionnaire portion of the research were selected on the basis that they were: (a.) over age 18 and (b.) willing to complete a short questionnaire immediately after experiencing the mansion tour and slave life tour at Mount Vernon. At the completion of the tour, visitors were offered the chance to fill out a short questionnaire. The survey did not request any identifying data, therefore the identity of all participants remains confidential.

Chapter 6

Results – On-Site Observations

First Impressions

After purchasing tickets, visitors are greeted by a security guard, briefly inspected, and then proceed to a variety of attractions. Visitors have the option of renting a tape player for a self-guided audio tour, but many visitors head for the main attraction: the mansion tour. Mount Vernon offers a variety of activities for visitors, making it easy to spend a full day on-site. Major attractions include the mansion tour, a self-guided audio tour, gardens, a gift shop, a formal restaurant, casual eateries, a seasonal slave life tour, a garden and landscape tour, a tomb tribute, a farm tour, a sightseeing cruise, as well as numerous special events throughout the year. This analysis of the tours focuses on the mansion tour and the slave life tour, as these are the attractions most relevant in understanding the lifestyle and living conditions of the residents of Mount Vernon.

The Mansion Tour

The mansion is clearly the most popular attraction, as the stately white structure is a major focal point. It is not unusual for long lines to form outside the mansion and for the wait time for tours to exceed one hour. The tour mainly focuses on furnishings and decorative features and historical interpreters stationed in each room share anecdotes relevant to the historical function of each part of the mansion. Visitors are treated as “honored guests” in the home of George Washington. We are assured that had we visited during Washington’s time, all of our needs would have been attended to by the “servants” (enslaved Blacks) for the duration of our stay. When visitors reach the kitchen it is explained that this is where “dinner is prepared”. The historical interpreters do not

specify who prepared dinner, thus avoiding the issue of slavery. At the conclusion of the tour, guests stand in George Washington's study and while a guide praises the Washington's historical legacy and asks visitors to imagine what the nation's first President was thinking as he stood in this space. The mansion tour is filled with praise of Washington's leadership, taste in architecture, and choice of furnishings, but there is no mention of the slaves without whom the mansion would have been unable to function on a daily basis.



George Washington's Mansion
Photograph by Keeley McGill, 2003

The Slave Life Tour

The slave life tour, in contrast to the mansion tour, attracts significantly smaller crowds. The tour is only offered from April through October. The forty-five minute tour commences on the lawn in front of the mansion and normally attracts groups of between

ten and twenty-five visitors. Unlike the mansion tour, which moves swiftly and follows a script, the slave life tour varies in its presentation. Depending on the historical interpreter, the tour may include anecdotes about runaway slaves, detailed information about farming and food preparation, highlights on popular Mount Vernon slaves, and a moderate amount of walking in the general vicinity of the mansion. Some tour guides take an interactive approach, while others spend most of the tour lecturing the crowd. The slave life tour invariably includes a visit to the slave quarters, a small brick room that has been sparsely furnished to re-create the “typical” dwelling of a Mount Vernon slave.



The Slave Quarters
Photograph by Keeley McGill, 2003

Historical interpreters on-site were not prepared to provide a detailed history of slave life at Mount Vernon or the slave life tour other than the basic slave life information provided on the tours. In order to get an in-depth perspective of the history of the slave

life tour at Mount Vernon as well as the popularity and function of the tour, I conducted a brief phone interview with Nancy Hayward, Assistant Director of Education at Mount Vernon on January 24, 2005.

According to Nancy Hayward, slavery was not a major topic in historical presentation at Mount Vernon until recently. While the slave quarters have been an exhibit at Mount Vernon since the 1950's, it was not until the mid 1990's when a formal presentation of the life of slaves at Mount Vernon became part of the tourist experience. The slave life tour is not as popular as the mansion tour, but it is included as part of every elementary and secondary school tour package.

While Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens functioned for nearly forty years with limited inclusion of the presentation of slave life, Hayward claims that most eighteenth century historical sites were not acknowledging slavery until the mid 1990s. She also explained that most modern historical sites remain focused on the featured historical figure and Mount Vernon worked diligently to find a balance between being educational and being entertaining to guests. In consideration of these goals, Mount Vernon decided to acknowledge slavery.

Audio Tour

The researcher opted to experience the optional self-guided audio tour on one of my observatory visits to Mount Vernon. The audio tour, titled "Mount Vernon: A Rural Village", is presented on a rented cassette player which can be obtained for a nominal fee. Unexpectedly, the audio tour provided most substantive interpretation of slave life at Mount Vernon.

The audio tour is narrated by an unnamed woman who speaks with a professional dialect (presumably a modern-day White American woman). Colonial music plays in the background throughout the audio tour, as well as environmental sounds, when appropriate. The narrator explains that since the “workers”, both Black and White, were so essential to the daily operations at Mount Vernon that it is only fitting that they assist in guiding the audio tour. For the remainder of the tour, listeners are “introduced” to a variety of Black slaves as well as a few White workers. There are few live actors at Mount Vernon, so the audio tour provides a voice for many of the exhibits.

It is important to note that the female narrator prefers the term “workers” to “slaves”. This is typical of the double-speak that is common at Mount Vernon. Most historical interpreters use the terms “workers” and “slaves” interchangeably and prefer to speak about the products of slave labor in the third person, for example, “the dinner was cooked” as opposed to “the slaves cooked dinner”.

The first person encountered on the audio tour is Tom Davis, a slave. Tom Davis is not a fictitious character, but a real Mount Vernon slave who was a well-known hunter who regularly provided the Washington family with fresh game (Thompson 1999). The narrator sounds startled when Tom greets her in a strong, deep voice. Tom speaks in a stereotypical black dialect, consisting of broken English and a lot of chuckling. He explains that he works as a mason, bricklayer, carpenter, painter, and hunter. Tom accompanies the narrator for the remainder of the audio tour, introducing her to a variety of other characters along the way.

As the audio tour nears the slave quarters, the colonial background music is drowned out by the sounds of children playing and household noises. After the narrator

hesitantly asks, “Is this where the... slaves... live?” Tom Davis cheerfully describes the slaves’ daily food rations, a typical workday, sleeping arrangements, and ways to gain approval from The General (George Washington).

In addition to Tom Davis, the audio tour includes interaction with three other slaves. William Lee is an elderly slave who works as a shoemaker. When encountered, he proudly boasts that he was George Washington’s personal servant until he sustained an injury (“busted both my kneecaps”). He explains that he is still needed and that Washington keeps him busy repairing shoes, since slaves get only one pair of shoes a year. Kitty, a female slave, is encountered in the spinning room making yarn. Kitty is working with Alla, one of her nine daughters. Kitty lovingly explains the process of spinning yarn and assures listeners that “spinning can be soothing, if you do it right.” In the washhouse listeners meet Dosey, a female slave who does laundry six days a week. Dosey complains about the roughness of her hands due to working with hot water and lye soap, but proudly shows off her ironing job on Washington’s “nice white shirts.”

At the conclusion of the tour, Tom Davis excuses himself at the stables. He explains “the General owns that jackass [donkey] and he owns me, too. I’ve gotta be back to workin’ now.” This statement is the only acknowledgement that slaves are actually owned and are not paid for their labor. After Tom Davis departs, the narrator explains that when Washington died 120 of his 312 slaves were freed, but Tom Davis was not freed because he belonged to Martha Washington. The tour concludes with a brief mention of George Washington’s tomb as well as the slave memorial.

In the audio tour some hardships of slavery (family separation, strict rules governing limited free time, cramped living conditions, and modest food rations) are

addressed, however they are somewhat overshadowed by the pride expressed by the slaves in the quality of their work and their desire to please their master. Overall, the audio tour presents slavery as a low-status occupation rather than an oppressive social system.

In contrast to the Washington-centered presentation throughout the rest of Mount Vernon, slaves served as central actors in the audio tour. Throughout Mount Vernon, slavery is nearly invisible and easily ignored. Outside of the slave life tour there is not explicit acknowledgement of slavery. Also notable is the fact that the only African American voices in the audio tour were those of enslaved Blacks with limited vocabulary who seemed intimidated by the female narrator. Although a voice was given to the slaves, the tour was obviously controlled by the White narrator. The major White character in the audio tour had a professional dialect and a modern perspective, while the Black characters were limited to their historically submissive roles.

Summary

The Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens hosts over one million visitors each year and based on my observations, most of these visitors are primarily interested in the mansion tour and the aesthetic beauty of the plantation. The history of the 312 slaves at Mount Vernon is present, but easily overlooked. The most substantial attempt to include the perception of Washington's slaves was found, surprisingly, in the audio tour. While the audio tour was co-narrated by an actor portraying a slave, it was somewhat stereotypical and put a positive spin on the harsh reality of slavery.

Chapter 7

Results – Data Collection

Data Collection Challenges

There were two major categories of data collection challenges encountered in this project. The first challenge was the lack of accessible Mount Vernon staff members who were knowledgeable about the history of slave life presentation at Mount Vernon. The second major challenge was gaining cooperation from visitors in completing surveys.

In order to thoroughly assess the presentation of slavery at Mount Vernon, it was essential to gain an understanding of how and why the current presentation of slave life at Mount Vernon was developed and implemented. The ideal way to learn about the selection and presentation of content in the Slave Life Tour and other inclusions of slaves at Mount Vernon is to speak with a member of the staff at Mount Vernon who has knowledge of the process through which information is selected to be disseminated for slave life presentation. In mid-2004, when data for this study was collected, it was nearly impossible to obtain any background information on slave life presentation from Mount Vernon staff. After numerous unreturned phone calls, no one was identified as being a resource for such matters. By late 2004, Mount Vernon completely redesigned their website, making it easier for visitors and members of the press to contact Mount Vernon staff. This improved, well-organized website resulted in contact with Nancy Hayward, Assistant Director of Education at Mount Vernon. Hayward cooperated for a brief phone interview, and a more detailed discussion of the conversation is detailed in Chapter 6.

Outside of the difficulties in reaching Mount Vernon staff, there were also some difficulties in collecting survey data. All survey data was collected in person at Mount

Vernon. Although the majority of Mount Vernon's visitors are White, a special effort was made to over-sample racial minorities. This was done to ensure sufficient data to make racial comparisons in the perception of presentation of slavery. Survey data was collected over the course of several visits from mid-August to early October, 2004. The majority of the visitors at Mount Vernon who were approached for survey participation were reluctant to participate in the study.

On the first data collection trip the researcher was accompanied by an African American male in his mid-twenties who volunteered to work as an assistant. Despite our efforts, few visitors agreed to complete the questionnaire. Many questioned the legitimacy of the request and then declined. On that particular day, the most cooperative visitors were women of all races and African Americans.

On the remaining data collection trips the researcher was accompanied by two white women in their mid-to-late twenties who volunteered to assist with data collection. Although gaining cooperation was not easy, the White female volunteers were more successful in soliciting responses from men of all races as well as White women.

The Sample

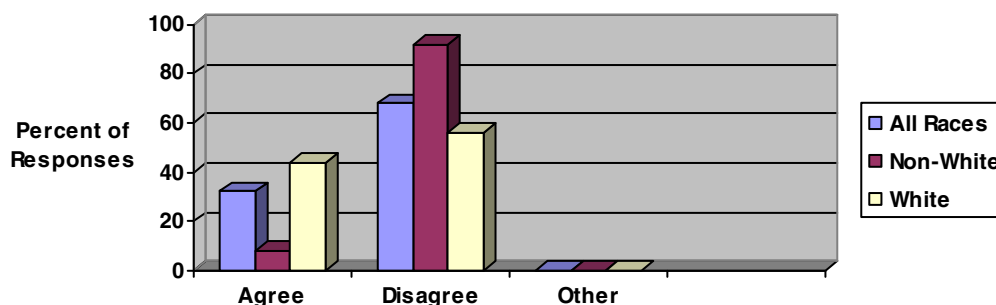
Questionnaires were collected from 38 participants: 28 women and 20 men. All participants were born in the United States. Among the women the racial breakdown was twelve Whites, two Blacks, two Asians, and two Latinas. Among the men the racial breakdown was thirteen Whites, six Blacks, and one Latino. Thirty-seven out of 38 participants had some level of college education. Respondents ranged from eighteen to over 65 years of age.

Survey Questions

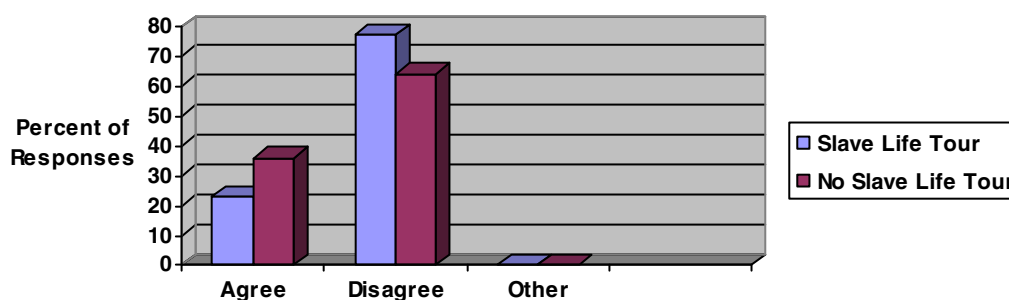
The first section of the questionnaire (Appendix B) included eight survey questions with six possible Likert scale responses: “strongly agree”, “agree”, “disagree”, “strongly disagree”, “cannot answer”, and “no opinion”. The instructions stated, “please indicate how much you agree with the following statements.” For data reporting purposes, due to the small sample size, “strongly agree” and “agree” were collapsed into one category: “agree”. “Disagree” and “strongly disagree” were collapsed into one category: “disagree”. Responses of “cannot answer” and “no opinion” were grouped into another category: “other”.

Responses to each question are displayed in two ways. First, responses are broken down by the self-reported racial background of the respondent. Second, responses are broken down by whether or not the respondent participated in the Mount Vernon Slave Life Tour prior to completing the survey. Whites and non-Whites were not equally likely to take the Slave Life Tour. Only 20 percent of Whites surveyed took the Slave Life Tour. Sixty-two percent of non-Whites surveyed took the Slave Life Tour. Based on preliminary research, the race of the respondent and participation in the Slave Life Tour were identified as factors that may have an influence on responses.

Graph 1A – Responses to “*George Washington and his family performed most of the labor at Mount Vernon*” by Race
(out of 100 percent)

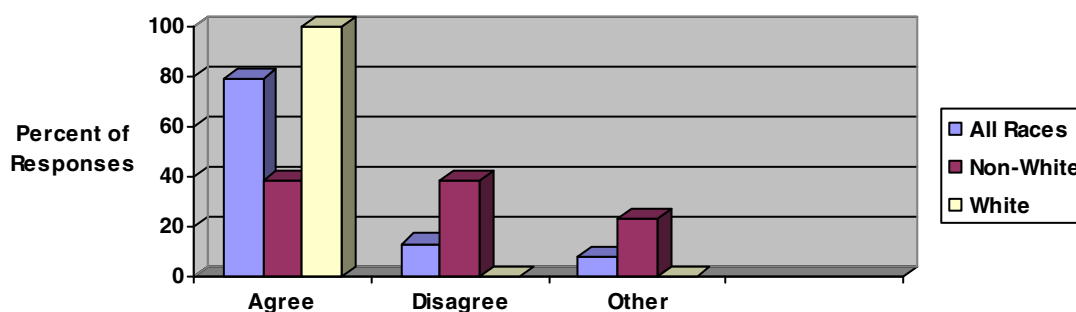


Graph 1B –Responses to “George Washington and his family performed most of the labor at Mount Vernon” by Slave Life Tour participation
(out of 100 percent)

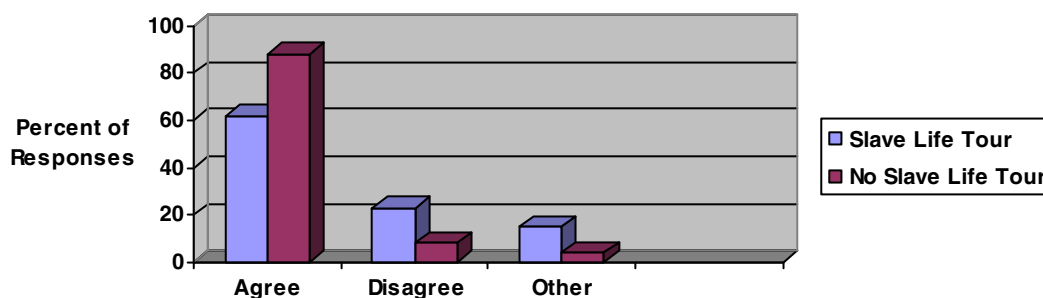


The first statement was “*George Washington and his family performed most of the labor at Mount Vernon.*” This survey question was designed to assess the degree to which visitors have been led to minimize the impact of slavery. This question also addresses the accuracy of visitor’s perceptions, since historical records provide evidence that the majority of the labor performed at Mount Vernon was performed by slaves. In spite of this historical fact, twelve out of 38 respondents (32% percent) agreed with this statement. Forty-four percent of White respondents agreed with this statement. Only 8% of non-White respondents agreed. One possible explanation for these responses is that these visitors may have been unaware that George Washington was a slave owner. However, even if these visitors were unaware of the existence of slavery at Mount Vernon, it is notable that three of these respondents actually took the Slave Life Tour prior to completing the questionnaire. Of respondents who took the Slave Life Tour, a lower percentage agreed with the statement. Only 23% of Slave Life Tour participants agreed that Washington and his family performed most of the labor at Mount Vernon, while 36% of people who did not take the Slave Life Tour believed that they did perform most of the labor.

Graph 2A – Responses to “*Slaves at Mount Vernon were treated Humanely*” by Race
(out of 100 percent)



Graph 2B – Responses to “*Slaves at Mount Vernon were treated Humanely*”
by Slave Life Tour Participation
(out of 100 percent)

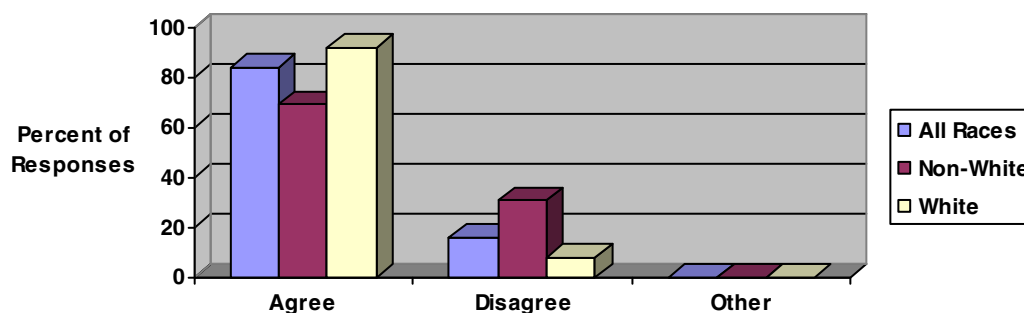


The second statement was “*Slaves at Mount Vernon were treated humanely.*”

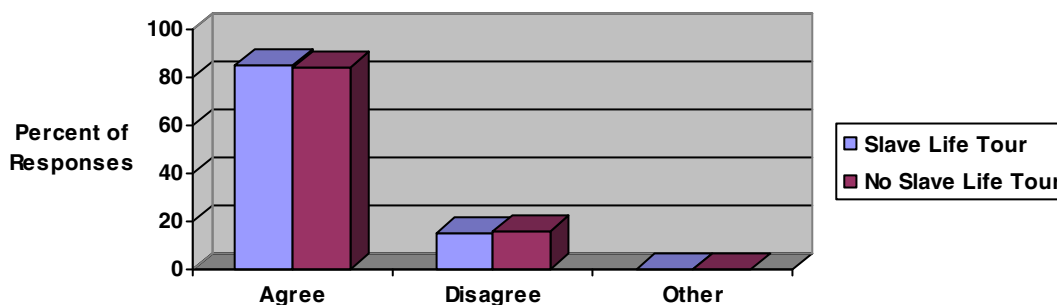
This question addresses visitors’ perception of the reality of slave life at Mount Vernon. It requires visitors to draw a conclusion based on a combination of their prior knowledge of slavery and their experience with its portrayal at Mount Vernon. There was a definite racial difference in responses to this question. One-hundred percent of White visitors agreed that slaves at Mount Vernon were treated humanely. Responses of non-white visitors were more evenly distributed. Only 38 percent of non-White respondents agreed with the statement, 38 percent disagreed, and a surprising 23 percent chose “cannot

answer” or “no opinion”. Responses of “cannot answer” and “no opinion” may be evidence that visitors felt they did not have enough information to make a judgment on the statement. Sixty-two percent of Slave Life Tour participants agreed with the statement, which is significantly lower than the 88 percent of non-Slave Life Tour participants who agreed. These responses may indicate that participation in the Slave Life Tour may lead visitors to be slightly more critical of the message of humane slave treatment.

Graph 3A. – Responses to “*It is important to understand that George Washington, though a slave owner, was behaving in a typical manner of the landowning aristocracy in his day*” by Race



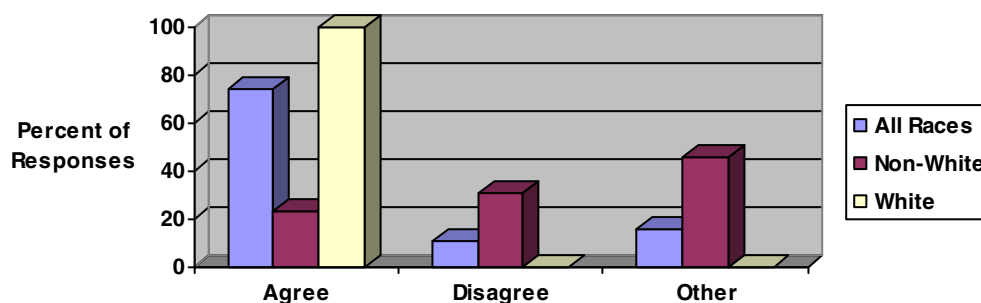
Graph 3B –Responses to Responses to “*It is important to understand that George Washington, though a slave owner, was behaving in a typical manner of the landowning aristocracy in his day*” by Slave Life Tour Participation



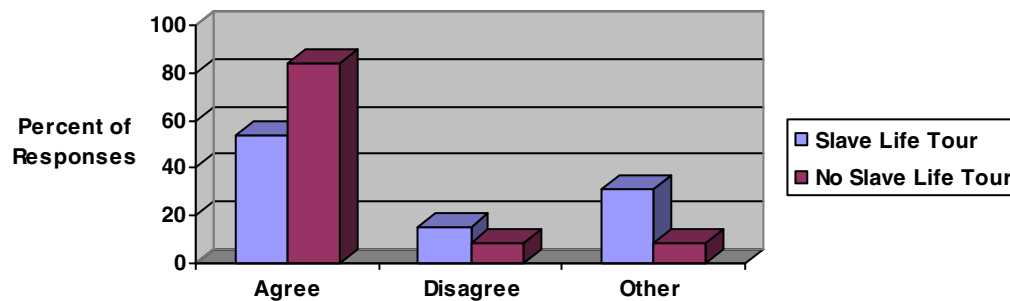
The third statement, “*It is important to understand that George Washington, though a slave owner, was behaving in a typical manner of the landowning aristocracy in*

his day” was designed to assess the degree to which class-based racial theory played into the presentation of slavery at Mount Vernon. This statement connects slave ownership to class status, thus testing the extent to which visitors associate slave ownership with class status. Thirty-two respondents (eighty-four percent) either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Race did not appear to be a factor in people’s responses to this question, as visitors of all races were highly likely to agree. Participation in the Slave Life Tour appears to have no effect on visitors’ responses to this question, as agreement and disagreement percentages were nearly equal, regardless of Slave Life Tour participation. Responses to this question suggest that Mount Vernon presents a class-based view of race to visitors. Participants were given an opportunity to elaborate their answers to this question in the open-ended questions section of the survey. These more detailed responses are elaborated in the next section.

Graph 4A – Responses to “*The presentation of slave life at Mount Vernon is historically accurate*” by Race

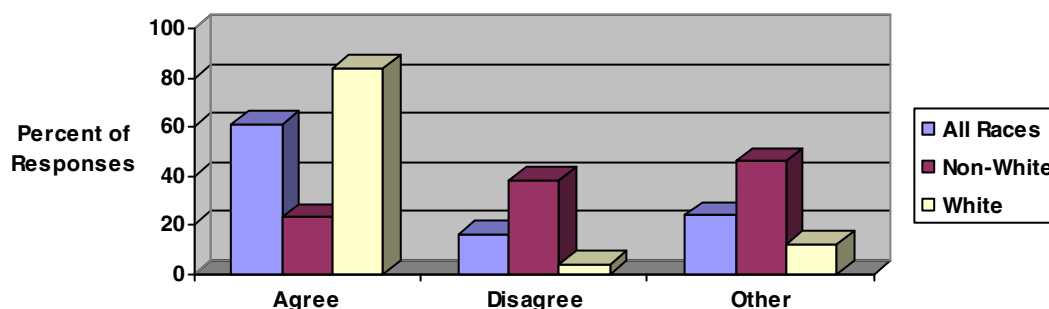


Graph 4B – Responses to “*The presentation of slave life at Mount Vernon is historically accurate*” by Slave Life Tour Participation

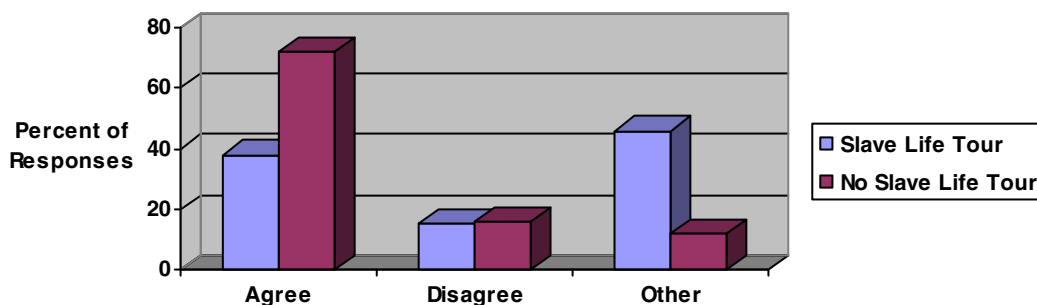


The fourth statement was “*The presentation of slave life at Mount Vernon is historically accurate.*” The responses do not strictly refer to the presentation of slavery at Mount Vernon as visitors’ responses may be affected by their prior knowledge of slavery. Ninety-two percent of Whites, compared to 69 percent of non-Whites, agreed with the statement. While some visitors may assume that the historical interpreters at Mount Vernon have authority in historical accuracy, others may use outside knowledge to answer this question. Twenty-eight respondents (73%) agreed with this statement. Fourteen percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. Another fourteen percent of respondents, all non-White, responded that they could not answer the question. Two people, also non-White, had no opinion about the statement. Participation in the Slave Life Tour was associated with higher levels of agreement. This may indicate that visitors find the tour historically authoritative and are satisfied with its presentation.

Graph 5A – Responses to “*Slaves at Mount Vernon were comfortable and self-fulfilled*” by Race



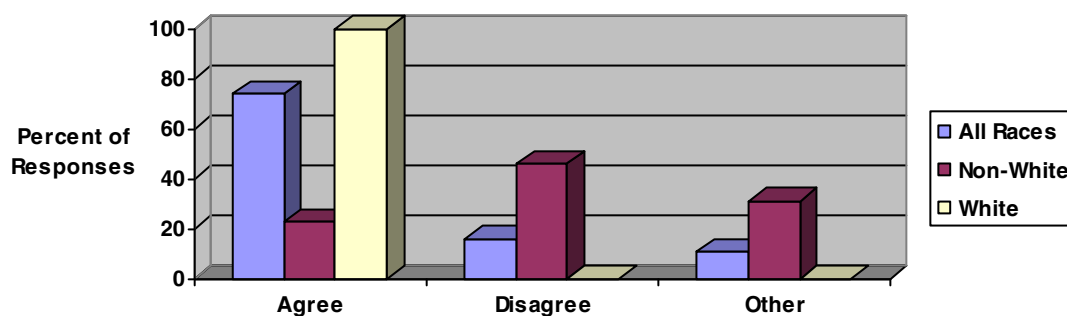
Graph 5B – Responses to “*Slaves at Mount Vernon were comfortable and self-fulfilled*” by Slave Life Tour Participation



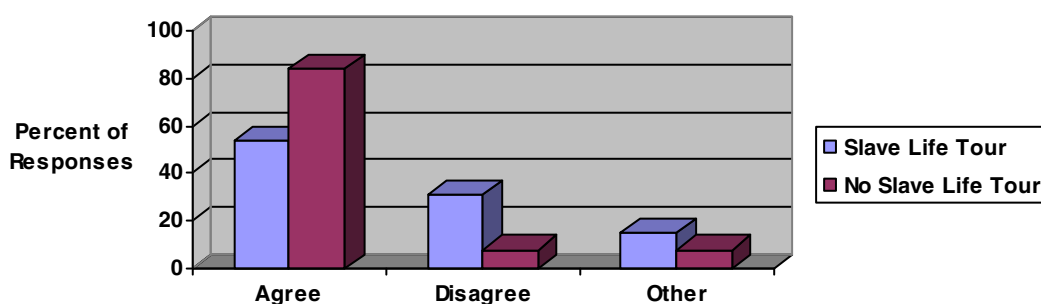
The fifth statement was “*Slaves at Mount Vernon were comfortable and self-fulfilled.*” This question was designed to assess visitors’ perception of the lifestyle of the slaves, especially since historical interpreters in the Slave Life Tour invariably stress that Washington allowed slaves to “marry” each other, maintain their own gardens, hunt for their own food, and sell their produce in a farmer’s market in Alexandria, all indicators of humane treatment and self-fulfillment. This interpretation of slave life may make slavery at Mount Vernon seem more like a temporary inconvenience than an oppressive social and economic system. Sixty-one percent of respondents agreed that slaves at Mount Vernon were comfortable and self-fulfilled. Eighty-four percent of Whites and only twenty-three percent of non-whites agreed with this statement. Twenty-four percent of

respondents chose “other”, indicating that they may have felt they had insufficient information to answer the question. Forty-six percent of non-Whites, but only twelve percent of Whites chose “other”. There was a substantial difference in responses based on Slave Life Tour participation. Only 38 percent of tour participants agreed, while 72 percent of non-participants agreed. These results indicate that non-Whites and Slave Life Tour participants are more likely than other groups to question the historical accuracy of the presentation of slavery at Mount Vernon.

Graph 6A – Responses to “George Washington lived and ruled in a manner that was a model for future American Presidents” by Race



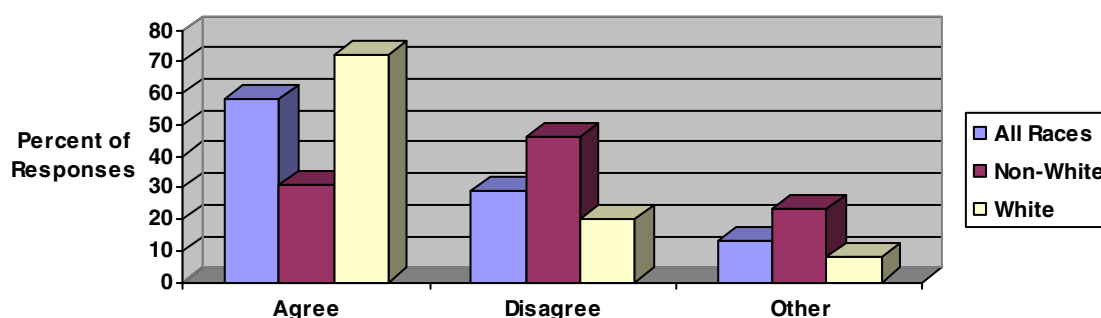
Graph 6B – Responses to “George Washington lived and ruled in a manner that was a model for future American Presidents” by Slave Life Tour Participation



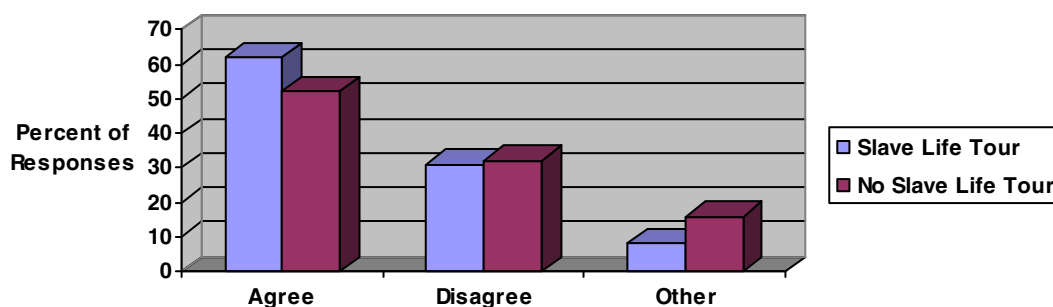
The sixth statement, “George Washington lived and ruled in a manner that was a model for future American Presidents” was designed to assess the level of loyalty and patriotism felt by visitors as a result of the image projected by the historical interpreters

at Mount Vernon. Seventy-four percent of respondents agreed with this statement. One hundred percent of Whites and seventy-four percent of non-Whites agreed. Only 54 percent of Slave Life Tour participants agreed, while 84 percent of non-participants agreed. Every White respondent, regardless of Slave Life Tour participation agreed. The majority of non-Whites agreed as well, but non-Whites who took the Slave Life Tour were less likely to agree. These responses, like some others in the survey, may be based less on Mount Vernon's message than visitors' background knowledge of slavery. Prior research (Loewen 1995, 1995) indicates that the textbooks and curriculum in American schools are a major factor in peoples' perception of major historical figures. Also, it should be noted that it is likely that Mount Vernon visitors come to the estate out of respect and admiration for Washington and are therefore less likely to be overly critical of his lifestyle.

Graph 7A –Responses to “George Washington expressed anti-slavery positions throughout his life” by Race

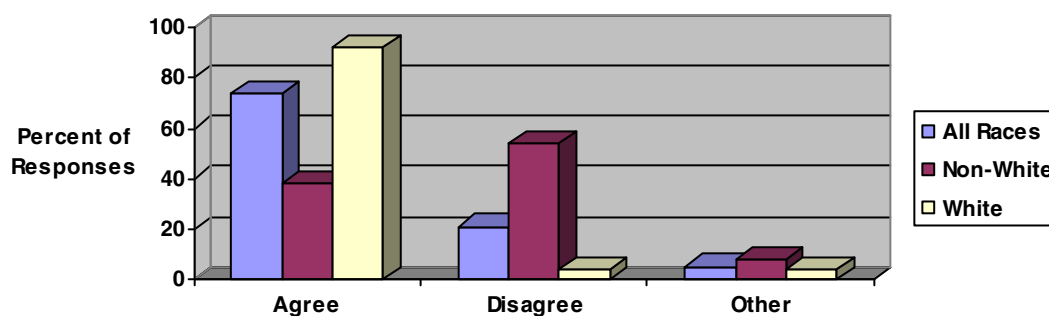


Graph 7B – Responses to “*George Washington expressed anti-slavery positions throughout his life*” by Slave Life Tour Participation

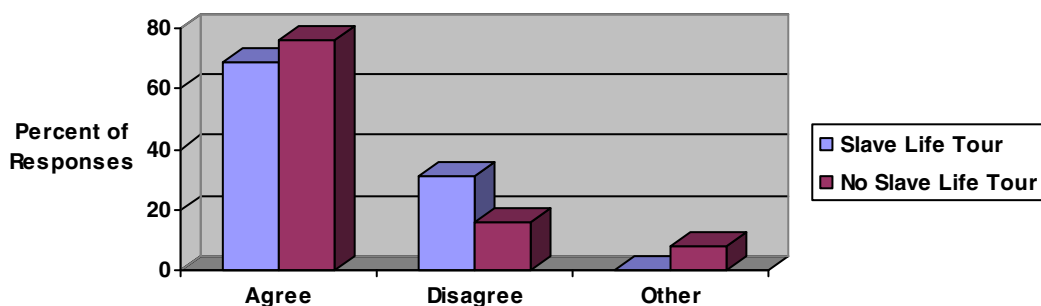


The seventh statement, “*George Washington expressed anti-slavery positions throughout his life*”, was designed to assess the accuracy of visitors’ recollection of Washington’s attitude toward slavery. Every historical interpreter encountered at Mount Vernon stressed that although George Washington was a slaver owner, he freed his slaves in his will. No interpreter, however, stated that Washington was always anti-slavery, because if he had been, he would not have owned slaves, yet fifty-eight percent of respondents agreed with this statement. Agreement was higher among Whites, with seventy-two percent of White agreeing compared with only thirty-one percent of non-Whites agreeing. There was a definite racial difference in response to this question. Among Slave Life Tour participants, sixty-two percent agreed with the statement, while fifty-two percent of non-tour participants agreed. It is notable that any of the Slave Life Tour participants agreed, since it was clearly stated on the tour that Washington was raised to believe in slavery as a way of life and did not have a change of opinion until after the Revolutionary War. Responses of visitors who agreed may have been more driven by the romanticism of Washington than by historical fact.

Graph 8A – Responses to “George Washington felt that slavery was immoral” by Race



Graph 8B – Responses to “George Washington felt that slavery was immoral” by Slave Life Tour Participation



The eighth and final statement was “George Washington felt that slavery was immoral.” This was another question designed to assess visitors’ perception of Washington’s attitudes. The argument can be made that if Washington felt that slavery was immoral, he would not have owned slaves. However, the historical interpreters at Mount Vernon explain that Washington did question the morality of slavery after fighting along free Blacks in the Revolutionary war. This is somewhat of a contradiction between ideology and action. Seventy-four percent of respondents agreed with this statement. Nearly all White respondents (92 percent) and a smaller proportion of non-White respondents (38 percent) agreed with this statement. This indicates a definite racial difference in visitors’ perceptions of Washington’s moral attitude toward slavery. Most

Whites believe that he understood the immorality of the institution, while most non-Whites were not convinced that Washington viewed his slave ownership as immoral. Slave Life Tour participants were slightly less likely to agree than non-tour respondents (69 percent versus 76 percent). It is not surprising that a majority of respondents who took the tour agreed, since historical interpreters emphasize Washington's anti-slavery ideology that occurred late in his life rather than his pro-slavery activities that characterized most of his actions.

Open-Ended Questions

The eight survey questions were complemented by five open-ended questions. Two of the questions asked participants to elaborate on their opinions from previous survey questions. The instructions for these two questions were, "please explain why you agree, disagree, or have no opinion about the following statements." One of the strengths of allowing visitors to rationalize their answers was that the researcher was able to pick up on the multiple interpretations that were possible for each question. The remaining three questions were designed to assess the accuracy of visitors' knowledge of the number of residents, both Black and White, residing at Mount Vernon during Washington's time. These final three questions required one-word or one-number responses. The instructions asked visitors, "please answer the following questions based on your personal opinions."

The first question asked visitors to elaborate on their answers to survey question number three, "*It is important to understand that George Washington, though a slave owner, was behaving in a typical manner of the landowning aristocracy in his day.*" The majority of respondents, 86 percent, agreed with this statement. Most cited the fact that

slavery was legal and an accepted way of life as a rationale for Washington's slave ownership. Many respondents also cited Washington's class status as an explanation for his slave ownership. One Asian female respondent wrote, "He was raised in that culture. Men of his class had slaves." Three respondents who agreed with the statement provided explanations that expressed personal disapproval with Washington's slave ownership. One Black male wrote, "White men in the 1700's had slaves even though it was wrong." Only fourteen percent respondents disagreed with the statement. One Latina wrote, "I disagree because it is historical truth that people lived at the same time who believed slavery was immoral, like the Quakers." Of those who completely disagreed, three were Latino, one was Black, and one was White.

The second question asked for an elaboration on survey question number two, *"Slaves at Mount Vernon were treated more humanely than those on other plantations."* While this question called on visitors to consider their knowledge of slavery at Mount Vernon based on their current visit, it also required visitors to consider their previous knowledge of slavery in general. The introduction of visitors' previous knowledge may have caused some inconsistencies in responses as some visitors may have studied slavery extensively, while others may have little or no knowledge of slavery outside of its existence. Twenty-eight visitors (or seventy-four percent) agreed that Mount Vernon slaves were treated more humanely than those on other plantations. Respondents' reasons for agreeing with this statement varied. One Black male respondent wrote, "Compared to the slaves of most landowners they [Mount Vernon slaves] were treated well. However, it [the treatment of Mount Vernon slaves] pales in comparison to Thomas Jefferson's treatment of his slaves." Apparently, this respondent felt that

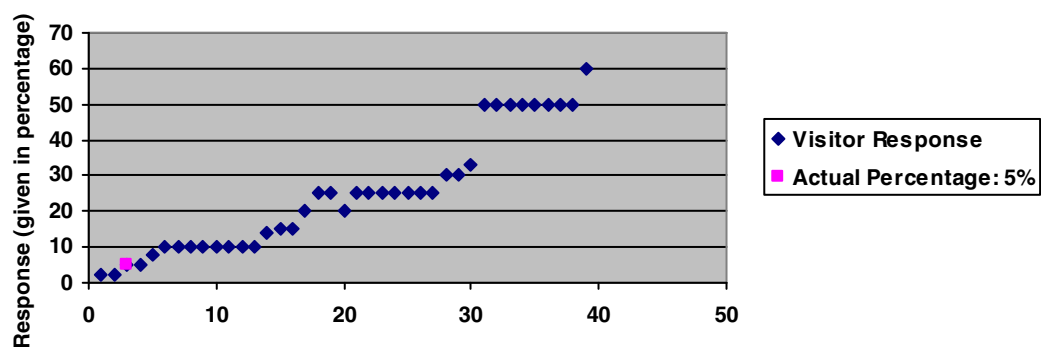
although George Washington treated his slaves well, Thomas Jefferson treated his slaves better. One White female respondent wrote, “The plantation was large and well-maintained, so they [the slaves] had better surroundings.” This respondent may have not considered that the surroundings were “well-maintained” because of the slaves’ own hard work. There were only four respondents who disagreed with the statement, but they all gave elaborate explanations for their opinions. One Black male wrote, “I disagree because much of what the guide [historical interpreter] spoke of was worded in such a way that it [slavery] appeared to be less harsh than it was. I don’t believe Washington really had concern for his slaves beyond profit and maintaining his status in the aristocracy.” One Latina simply wrote, “The mere fact of being a slave is inhumane.” Six respondents had no opinion on this statement.

For the first two open-ended questions, it is interesting to note that there were multiple interpretations possible. Most visitors agreed with the original statement, but there was great variation in rationale for agreement. Some respondents used their agreement to dismiss Washington’s slave ownership or to rationalize their belief in humane slave treatment at Mount Vernon. Others used their agreement to state that while slave ownership was widespread, it was not morally acceptable in any time period. Overall, for these two questions, respondents’ agreement or disagreement with the statement was not as strong of an indicator of attitudes as was respondents’ elaborated responses.

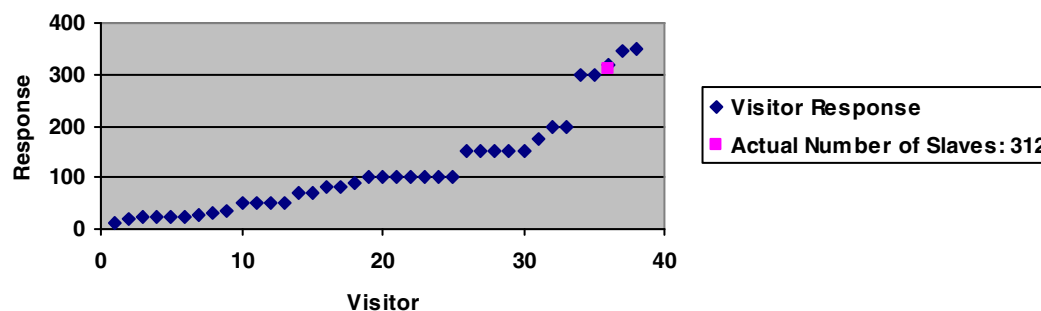
In addition to there being multiple interpretations of respondents’ agreement or disagreement with statements, there are also multiple interpretations of answers categorized as “other” (labeled “cannot answer” or “no opinion” on the original survey).

Visitors may choose “cannot answer” because they do not have enough background information to respond, or perhaps because they feel that not only is the information not known by them, it is not known by anyone. “Cannot answer” may also indicate that the visitor has become confused by the volume of conflicting information presented between their schooling, Mount Vernon, and personal opinion. Responses of “no opinion” may mean that the visitor does not want to answer the question, has not considered the question, or does not understand the question. Some people who gave these “other” responses may not be indecisive, but instead very careful in their response, making an effort to consider all possible interpretations of the question.

Graph 9 – Responses to “What percentage of the people living at Mount Vernon were White?”
(Actual answer = 5 %)



Graph 10 – Responses to “How many slaves lived at Mount Vernon?” (Actual answer = 312)



Visitors' responses to the last two open ended questions may have put the other questionnaire responses into perspective. One question asked "Did you take the slave life tour today?" Only thirteen respondents had opted to take the slave life tour. The results also indicated that non-White respondents were no more likely than respondents of any other race to participate in the slave life tour. Sixty-two percent of all Slave Life Tour participants surveyed were non-White. This is not surprising since on-site observations indicated that the Slave Life Tour was not the most popular attraction at Mount Vernon.

Since there is little mention of slaves outside of the slave life tour, it is not surprising that most visitors surveyed did not have a realistic perception of the ratio of Black to White residents at Mount Vernon. The vast majority of visitors had no idea of the percentage of White residents at Mount Vernon. Responses ranged from 2% to 60%, with few visitors giving responses close to the actual percentage of White residents: 5% (Graph 9). Few visitors gave an accurate answer to the question "How many slaves do you think lived at Mount Vernon?" Answers ranged from twelve to 350, with the vast majority of respondents greatly underestimating the actual number of slaves: 312 (Graph 10). These responses may suggest an underestimate of slaves' contribution to the plantation economy at Mount Vernon.

Summary

The Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens does not attract a racially diverse pool of visitors. Based on observations on-site and information given in survey responses, visitors are overwhelmingly White, middle-class, and college-educated. Respondents of all races were likely to have misconceptions about Washington's slave ownership, the number of slaves present at Mount Vernon, and the degree to which Mount Vernon

depended on slave labor. White respondents were slightly more likely than Black respondents to minimize the impact of slavery on life at Mount Vernon. Of the few responses that were critical to the presentation of slavery at Mount Vernon, the majority came from respondents from racial minority backgrounds, particularly Blacks and Latinos.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

Discussion

The 38 survey respondents answered thirteen survey questions based on their own beliefs and experiences. On-site observations and visitor surveys indicate that the presentation of slavery at Mount Vernon is imbalanced and at times inconsistent. It is also evident that the history of the hundreds of slaves at Mount Vernon is marginalized and easily avoided by most visitors. In spite of these facts, most visitors, regardless of race are not overly critical of the presentation of slavery at Mount Vernon. Non-White visitors and Slave Life Tour participants were slightly more likely than White visitors who did not take the Slave Life Tour to give survey responses indicating some degree of criticism of the presentation of slavery.

The theoretical framework for this research, detailed in Chapter 4, involved utilizing existing racial theories and determining which, if any, of existing racial theories best explained the presentation of slavery at Mount Vernon. No single racial theory completely explains Mount Vernon's presentation of race. Instead, it is evident that a combination of theories, primarily class-based, colorblind racism and nation-based, best illustrate the presentation of race at Mount Vernon.

Class-based theory appears to provide an explanation since the major rationale given for George Washington's ownership of slaves relies on an argument that he was simply participating in an economic system that was common among men of his class during his time. Historical interpreters do not mention racism, per se, but instead stress class differences that were common during Washington's life. Although racism is

inherent in American slavery, historical interpreters at Mount Vernon depend heavily on class-based explanations to discuss slavery with visitors.

On-site observations indicated that Mount Vernon's historical interpreters admit that Washington owned slaves, but they downplay the moral issues involved with being a slave owner. His ownership of slaves is excused because they claim he was following the norm of men in his social class and he did not want to create divisions within the newly formed nation. Historical interpreters at Mount Vernon make it a priority to stress that George Washington freed his slaves after his death. However, Washington never took a public stance against slavery at any point during his life. George Washington is presented as a member of an elite society who owned slaves because slave ownership was an expected and accepted part of membership in the elite social class. The status of slaves on the Mount Vernon plantation is portrayed as a function of class, rather than attributing any difference in treatment between Whites and Blacks on the plantation to racism. By minimizing the role of race in slavery at Mount Vernon, historical interpreters at the site are also minimizing the racism inherent in the institution of slavery.

Among survey responses, indicators of a class-based presentation of race are responses to statements such as "It is important to understand that George Washington, though a slave owner, was behaving in a typical manner of the landowning aristocracy of his day." This question was included in both the survey and open-ended sections of the questionnaire and in both cases the majority of visitors agreed with the statement. Agreement was interpreted as an acceptance of slave ownership as an accepted lifestyle

choice. This perception may be the result of Mount Vernon's historical interpreters' repeated efforts to put Washington's slave ownership into an historical context.

Colorblind theory, mainly the "naturalization" and "minimization of racism" tenets, appears to impact the presentation of race at Mount Vernon because the historical interpreters at Mount Vernon are reluctant to acknowledge the racial issues. On-site observations, particularly those of the Slave Life Tour, indicate that naturalization is evident in historical interpreters' tendency to make no correlation between historical and contemporary race relations and suggest that slavery at Mount Vernon is a natural occurrence without any discussion of the complex historical and social factors involved. When race is not mentioned as a basis for slavery, visitors can conclude that poverty and hardship were equally distributed among people of all races and that these disadvantages are the result of class discrimination as opposed to racism. The implication of this portrayal is that visitors may walk away with the impression that slavery at Mount Vernon was more humane than it actually was. Minimization of racism is present because there is no real discussion of the tensions between the slaves and the White residents of Mount Vernon. Bonilla-Silva defines this tenet by considering only overt behaviors racist. However, in this case slavery itself is not connected to racism. In anecdotes told to visitors, runaway slaves are portrayed as deviant as opposed to being racially oppressed. Washington is praised by interpreters for his "humane" treatment of slaves because he allowed slaves to marry and cohabitate. No interpreters mention that allowing slaves to marry and cohabitate encouraged them to reproduce, which led to more wealth for Washington.

Several survey questions addressed the naturalization and minimization of racism present at Mount Vernon. Among these are statements such as “George Washington and his family performed most of the labor at Mount Vernon”, “Slaves at Mount Vernon were treated humanely”, “Slaves at Mount Vernon were comfortable and self-fulfilled”, “George Washington expressed anti-slavery positions throughout his life”, and “George Washington felt that slavery was immoral”. Overall, the majority of respondents agreed with these statements. These statements were created as survey questions with the goal of measuring how aware visitors were of the severity of racial slavery at Mount Vernon. Agreement with these responses was interpreted as a minimization of the racism inherent in slavery.

Nation-based theory, more specifically the emphasis on cultural domination within this theory, also describes the portrayal and interpretation of slavery at Mount Vernon. The fact that a group of privileged White women are in charge of Mount Vernon and have the ability to dictate the story told about slavery is a prime example of cultural domination. White American culture dictates our understanding of slavery to such an extent that mistruths are taken for granted and visitors are unlikely to question the perspective of the historical interpreters at Mount Vernon.

Two survey questions specifically addressed nation-based theory. One was the statement, “The presentation of slave life at Mount Vernon is historically accurate.” The majority of respondents agreed with this statement. Considering that the presentation of slavery at Mount Vernon is the result of a mainstream (White American) interpretation of the poorly documented lives of enslaved Blacks, visitors were affected by the cultural domination evident at Mount Vernon. Responses to the statement “George Washington

lived and ruled in a manner that was a model for future American Presidents” elicited agreement from most White respondents and disagreement from most non-White respondents. These responses can be interpreted as White respondents greater likelihood to accept the heroes created by White American culture.

Significance and Implications

In the process of observing tours and collecting data it became evident that there are some inconsistencies in the context of tours and exhibits, particularly in the Slave Life Tour. This observation, combined with the fact that many visitors seem unaware or disinterested in the history of slavery at Mount Vernon creates a situation in which visitors can leave Mount Vernon, a plantation that was maintained by the slave labor of over 300 enslaved Blacks, and not learn anything about slave life.

Some visitors do leave Mount Vernon with some level of exposure to slave life. Unfortunately, this exposure is likely to include half-truths and racial stereotyping. On-site observations and survey responses indicate that there are some issues with the accuracy of the presentation of slavery at Mount Vernon. Many visitors are uninformed about the number of slaves, living conditions of slaves, and the stance that the nation’s first President took toward slavery.

The combination of inconsistent information about slavery and the lack of visitor knowledge of or interest in slavery at Mount Vernon maintains the marginalization of the history of enslaved Blacks at Mount Vernon. Visitors remain misinformed and historical interpreters are not mandated to increase their personal knowledge of slavery.

Limitations and Future Research

The nature of this study did not allow for an assessment of subjects' knowledge of slave life prior to exposure to its presentation at Mount Vernon. It is highly likely that such knowledge impacted the responses. A possible way to assess prior knowledge would be to administer a pre- and post-evaluation of a selected number of visitors, although considering the difficulty in getting visitors to cooperate on one round of data collection, gaining cooperation from subjects would be difficult. At the least, a strong incentive would have to be offered.

This project also depended on a relatively small sample of thirty-eight subjects to draw conclusions about visitors' attitudes. There was some difficulty making comparisons based on race, economic background, or educational level due to the limited sample. While the survey sample was limited, this study did not rely solely on survey responses but instead a combination of historical research, on-site observations, and responses to open-ended questions.

There are few research studies that address the portrayal of slavery at American historical sites. Because of this fact, there were few previous studies to use as models or points of reference. Considering the limitations imposed on this research by resources, participant cooperation, and limited previous research, only limited conclusions can be made on potential distortions in the presentation of slavery at Mount Vernon. Future research could explore these deficiencies in more depth.

APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

The Presentation of Slavery at Mount Vernon:
Power, Privilege, and Historical Truth

I state that I am over 18 years of age and wish to participate in a program of research being conducted by Linda Moghadam in the Department of Sociology at the University of Maryland, College Park.

The purpose of this research is to learn about the portrayal of slavery at Mount Vernon and visitors' reactions to this portrayal.

I will be filling out a non-invasive questionnaire about my opinions on the historical interpretations at Mount Vernon. The questionnaire is designed to take less than 10 minutes to complete. I understand that I may choose to skip any questions that I do not wish to answer.

All information collected in this study is confidential to the extent permitted by law. I understand that the data I provide will be grouped with data others provide for reporting and presentation and that my name will not be used.

There are no risks involved in participating in this research aside from possible difficulty in expressing personal opinions about race, which is a controversial topic.

Benefits of this research include a greater awareness among participants of historical controversies and an outlet to express concerns about such issues.

Contact information of investigators:

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Keeley McGill, Co-Investigator
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University of Maryland, College Park
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Phone: 302-690-6211

NAME OF PARTICIPANT _____

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT _____

DATE _____

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE

Instructions: Please answer the following questions. You may skip any questions that you do not care to answer.

Survey Questions: Please use the following key to answer the questions below.

Key: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD), Cannot Answer (CA), No Opinion (NOP) Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements. Please circle your answer.

1. "George Washington and his family performed most of the labor at Mount Vernon."
(SA) (A) (D) (SD) (CA) (NOP)
2. "Slaves at Mount Vernon were treated humanely."
(SA) (A) (D) (SD) (CA) (NOP)
3. "It is important to understand that George Washington, though a slave owner, was behaving in a typical manner of the landowning aristocracy in his day."
(SA) (A) (D) (SD) (CA) (NOP)
4. "The presentation of slave life at Mount Vernon is historically accurate."
(SA) (A) (D) (SD) (CA) (NOP)
5. "Slaves at Mount Vernon were comfortable and self-fulfilled."
(SA) (A) (D) (SD) (CA) (NOP)
6. "George Washington lived and ruled in a manner that was a model for future American Presidents."
(SA) (A) (D) (SD) (CA) (NOP)
7. "George Washington expressed anti-slavery positions throughout his life."
(SA) (A) (D) (SD) (CA) (NOP)
8. "George Washington felt that slavery was immoral."
(SA) (A) (D) (SD) (CA) (NOP)

Open-Ended Questions

Please explain why you agree, disagree, or have no opinion about the following statements:

1. "It is important to understand that George Washington, though a slave owner, was behaving in a typical manner of the landowning aristocracy in his day."
2. "Slaves at Mount Vernon were treated more humanely than those on other plantations."

Please answer the following questions, based on your personal opinions:

1. Did you take the Slave Life Tour today at Mount Vernon? _____
2. How many slaves do you think lived at Mount Vernon? _____
3. What percentage of the people living at Mount Vernon were white? _____

Background Information

What is your gender? (Please check one.) ☐ Male ☐ Female

What is your age?

☐ 18-24 ☐ 25-35 ☐ 36-45 ☐ 46-55 ☐ 56-65 ☐ 65 or older

What is your nationality/race/ethnicity? (Please check all that apply.)

<input type="checkbox"/> U.S. born	<input type="checkbox"/> White/European	<input type="checkbox"/> Native American	<input type="checkbox"/> Other
<input type="checkbox"/> Non-U.S. born	<input type="checkbox"/> Black/African/Caribbean	<input type="checkbox"/> (American Indian)	<input type="checkbox"/> (Please describe)
	<input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic/Latino	<input type="checkbox"/> Asian/Pacific Islander	_____
	<input type="checkbox"/> Bi/Multi-Ethnic	<input type="checkbox"/> Middle Easterner	_____

What is the highest level of education you have attained?

<input type="checkbox"/> some high school	<input type="checkbox"/> high school graduate	<input type="checkbox"/> some college	<input type="checkbox"/> college graduate
<input type="checkbox"/> some graduate or professional school	<input type="checkbox"/> graduate or professional degree		

What class category best describes your current socio-economic identity? (Please check all that apply.)

<input type="checkbox"/> Blue Collar	<input type="checkbox"/> Working Poor	<input type="checkbox"/> Middle Class	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please describe)
<input type="checkbox"/> White Collar	<input type="checkbox"/> Working Class	<input type="checkbox"/> Upper-Middle Class	
_____		<input type="checkbox"/> Upper Class	

Thank you for your cooperation!

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