I Cannot Tell Your Lie: Alternate and Dominant Narratives of Slavery at Mount Vernon, Virginia

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Figure 1: Monument in the slave burial ground at Mount Vernon
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Chapter One: Introduction

September 21st, 1983 is a day etched in stone at the Virginian plantation known as ‘George Washington’s Mount Vernon: Estate, Museum and Gardens.’ It represents the culmination of a politically charged time when the dominant narrative of slavery at Mount Vernon was forced to integrate the demands of the alternate narratives. The plantation’s owners, The Mount Vernon Ladies Association (MVLA), did not want to build a monument commemorating the lives of hundreds of people buried in the slave burial ground. They resisted a few descendants of people who had been enslaved at Mount Vernon as well as their supporters, Black Women United For Action (BWUFA). After reporter Dorothy Gillian published an inflammatory article about the burial ground in the Washington Post on February 6, 1982, this group publically demanded that MVLA take better care of the plantation’s slave burial ground, which had fallen into disrepair. They instructed that the hilled burial site be recovered from the overgrown forest, protected from visitors littering and trampling the fragile soil, and given a monument to honor the unmarked graves of the enslaved. These descendants had Fairfax County legal counsel on their side, as County Supervisors James Scott and Frank Mathews, angered by the article, threatened to remove Mount Vernon’s tax-exempt status for two of its restaurants if Mount Vernon didn’t comply with descendant demands. With these powerful allies, those holding the alternate narrative eventually received their demands in 1983.

Today, the burial ground, located on a wooded hill overlooking the Potomac River hosts a simple monument made of granite (Figure 1). It is raised by three brick circles, each displaying one of three words, ‘faith, love, hope.’ The key engraving on display states, ‘In Memory of the Afro Americans Who Served as Slaves at Mount Vernon, This Monument Marking their Burial Ground Dedicated September 21st, 1983, MVLA.’ For all those involved in creating this
monument, and those concerned with slave narratives at Mount Vernon, the monument has an intrinsic meaning. It represents the ongoing struggle between the dominant narrative of Mount Vernon, and alternate narratives belonging to descendants of enslaved people about the “truth” of slavery on this famous plantation. September 21st, 1983 was a small victory for the descendants who successfully adjusted how Mount Vernon presented slavery to the public.

The slave burial ground monument does not represent an isolated incident. Rather, it is a highly publicized sliver of controversy representative of a centuries-long divergence between narratives of slavery at Mount Vernon. The struggle between these narratives is prominent today. Employees at Mount Vernon as well as the descendants of the plantation’s enslaved people offer complex perspectives centered on slavery at this important historical setting. Staff members at Mount Vernon have gone to great lengths to construct and protect “the story” of the first president. At the same time, Black American memories of Mount Vernon diverge from and challenge this dominant narrative. By analyzing these tensions that arise from different perspectives we can see that they have sprung from Virginia’s deeply rooted history of slavery.

In recent years, efforts on the part of staff to present a more complete history of slavery at Mount Vernon has shed light on the sensitivity of the issue between those who represent Mount Vernon, and those whose ancestors were enslaved on it. The burial ground monument represented one formal act of healing and reconciliation. Today, it embodies the tensions between different versions of truth, and the constant struggle to be heard or to silence, embrace or ignore the contradictions the past can hold. Thus, in the case of Mount Vernon, a painful history impacts the present, but at the same time present perspectives and reactions to this history influence how it is told.
This project concerns the struggle between the dominant narrative of slavery at Mount Vernon and the alternate narratives of descendants of enslaved people. It highlights the contradictions in history-telling between the White-dominated MVLA who favor written records and Black descendants who use and rely on oral histories to learn about and understand the past. These oral histories are absent from the Mount Vernon narrative. I believe that a solely Eurocentric perspective weakens our understandings of slavery. By looking at descendant oral histories, I argue that there is not an absolute truth about the history of slavery in sites like Mount Vernon. Rather, many different and often contesting truths co-exist. When so many emotions, perspectives and personal convictions overflow from a painful chapter of American history, linear narratives do not seem to work.

In this project, I am not interested in positioning myself in favor of one perspective over another, as narrative dominance is the very concept I wish to deconstruct. Rather, my firm position is that alternate narratives have as much right to speak for the history of slavery at Mount Vernon as the dominant narrative. Many times these alternate narratives offer what the dominant does not. For instance, oral histories breathe life and complexity into written records and scientific data. The power of an oral narrative is in its intimacy with an individual, or within a family.

Although some narratives are discovered through written records, others are passed down through the generations, surpassing the life of the eyewitness. These histories, treated like a family treasure inherited by each generation are what I term *living heirlooms*. These living heirlooms often embody the secrecy of slavery at Mount Vernon through the individual family stories they tell. While some stories have managed to live through generations, others are resuscitated by curious descendants who go digging through family memories and written
records seeking out the “truth” about their ancestry at Mount Vernon. The diversity of narratives suggests a divided understanding of the past. Interestingly, in their “incompleteness” the dominant narrative and alternate narratives challenge each other and enrich the past with the plurality of truth.

**Constructing the Project**

For an Intro to Archaeology class in the spring of 2010, a peer, Danait Teklay and I proposed a hypothetical archaeological excavation of the slave burial ground at Mount Vernon. Our professor, Andrew Overman and classmates encouraged us to introduce our idea to Mount Vernon staff. That December, we presented our idea to administrative staff member Daniel and head archeologist Esther, and it was rejected. During that trip my interests shifted to the dynamics between descendants and Mount Vernon staff. This inspired my field research questions in the summer of 2011.

Before returning the next summer, I set up a series of interviews with descendants as well as Mount Vernon staff, introducing myself and following AAA policy. From July 1st to the 21st, I stayed in Old Alexandria with a Macalester Alumna and her family, conducting interviews and participant observation. While I promised each descendant that I would protect their identity in my final project, some specifically requested that I use their real names, and I have respected that.

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1 Daniel’s name has been changed.  
2 This meeting will be discussed in depth in Chapter Four.  
3 Before each interview, I collected a signature from a one-page research consent form preapproved by the SSIRB at Macalester College.  
4 Therefore, some names are pseudonyms and others are real, and I will specify the pseudonyms when the names comes up.
My project is built from audio-recorded interviews with eleven people who share a connection to Mount Vernon. These break down to eight descendants and three Mount Vernon staff. I used a website that descendants had made titled ‘Washington, Custis Lee Slave Descendants’ to contact descendants who might be willing to meet with me.\(^5\) The descendants featured in this project either responded to me through email or were put in contact with me by someone who did. Not all of these people have met each other, or even know of each other. However, their deep ties with this historic home and its history of slavery provide a valuable diversity of perspectives in this paper.

**Limitations**

This project is limited by the fact that I only spent three weeks conducting face-to-face interviews. However, I have kept in touch with several descendants and staff, asking follow-up questions. Additionally, several of the people I interviewed have published their own findings or have been interviewed for publications. The immense scope of information written about Mount Vernon has helped provide a solid background to my fieldwork, and much of my analysis is based on the works of others about slavery at Mount Vernon.

My identity as a white woman born and raised in Washington State also influenced my work, as I grew up mostly removed from the strong racial tensions persisting in the southern United States. While I learned about slavery and racism in history textbooks, I did not appreciate how fresh these issues still are in Virginia until I started my field work in Washington DC. As one descendant stated, “you’re not even from this part of the country, so you have no idea about

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how there are remnants of what went on in that time that are still trying to exist today." That statement stuck with me throughout this project. My awareness of my own naivety as well as the sensitivity of the issues I was researching would shape the way I asked questions, which in turn influenced the answers I received. Thus, in acknowledging these personal limitations early in the project, I was able to approach my research with self-reflexivity.

My project does not deeply discuss the broad and complex histories of the transatlantic slave trade, or the long history of slavery in the United States of America. In the interest of space, I will briefly present these relevant topics in the following section, leaving the detail they deserve to the broad array of scholars who have already tackled these issues. This allows me to focus on the oral histories I have collected.

Terminology

For a project focused on a painful history of slavery, words become quite powerful, carrying different connotations with them wherever they are used. In this project I will use enslaved people to refer to the ancestors of those I have interviewed. I believe ‘slave,’ removes the actions of the “enslavers,” from the concept of slavery. Additionally the word “slave,” removes individuality and agency from the people who were enslaved. In relation to this, I will refer to those whose ancestors were enslaved at Mount Vernon as descendants of enslaved people, or descendant(s). Finally, in reference to the different narratives of truth, I refer to the narrative supported by the MVLA as the dominant narrative. This narrative is in favor of supporting the idealistic conceptualization of George Washington as a symbol of freedom and democracy. On the other hand, narratives held by descendants, that challenge this dominant

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6 Transcribed interview with Gloria Tancil-Holmes at her home on July 14th, 2010. Lasted one hour. All subsequent quotes from Gloria come from this interview.
narrative are what I term *alternate narratives*. My use of the term ‘alternate’ suggests these are 
interchangeable truths. The terminology allows them equal footing in these pages, a liberty they 
do not have in many other works.

Finally, I use the word “truth” in this project to describe the individually constructed 
understandings of historical events. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, the history-telling process 
is a constant struggle between those who insist on facts-as-truth, and those who offer counter 
narratives as truth. Thus, in this work, the word ‘truth’ refers to fragmented as well as linear 
understandings of the past.

**Historical Context**

Before I introduce the descendant oral narratives, it is important to have an idea of what 
their ancestors might have experienced. Three descendants that I spoke with for this project 
belong on the same extended family tree. Let me tell you about the Quanders, a family that traces 
its lineage to Mount Vernon, and even further back to early modern Ghana. In doing so, we can 
remember that the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery were deeply personal experiences.

Sometime before the Maryland census of 1684, one man found himself in the hull of a 
slave ship, shackled to strangers. His name was Amkwandoh, and he was likely an ancestor of 
the modern day Fanti people in the Ghanaian coastal region. He might have spoken an older 
dialect of Akan or any number of languages in the Kwa family. Whatever life Amkwandoh lived 
before this moment he would never see again. He was caught in the largest and longest forced 
migration of people in world history: the transatlantic slave trade.

This trade was incredibly vast in terms of geographic space, time and populations 
affected, leaving many questions unanswerable. One estimate suggests that the transatlantic slave
trade began in the late 15th century and ended in the late 19th century (the trans-atlantic slave trade database). Along the way, 11 million Africans were ripped from their former lives and thrust into chattel slavery in the Americas. Looking at it from a statistical bird’s eye view, Amkwandoh was just one commoditized body adding to a booming global trade, seventy years before it hit its peak century (1750-1850).

There are countless possible explanations as to why Amkwandoh was forced into enslavement. He might have been a prisoner of war or found guilty of a crime. Other Africans could have kidnapped him from his village and “sold” him to European slavers. However this happened, Amkwandoh was somehow transported to a seaport and loaded onto a slaving boat. While he probably didn’t travel far by land, African slavers sometimes uprooted others from farther inland, a journey that could have taken weeks or months on foot. These enslaved peoples packed into an overcrowded hull probably came from diverse cultural and geographical backgrounds, speaking several different languages.

Once on the boat, Amkwandoh might have spent days lying down on his side with very little space, while the boat floated off the coast. The captain of the ship could have decided to make a stop at the Canary Islands to wait for the right wind patterns before making the long passage across the Atlantic Ocean. In total, the voyage Amkando experienced across the open sea in the late seventeenth century probably took two months.

Along the way, the human cargo stashed in the hull of this slave ship would have been subjected to disease, starvation and death. Amkwandoh was kept naked and shackled to other African men for most of the voyage. The slave ship crew would have brought him on deck occasionally, forcing him to dance both for exercise and their own entertainment (Christopher, 2006). Diseases festered in these crowded ships, ensuring that twelve to thirteen percent of the
people who embarked would not survive the crossing (Eltis, 2007). Amkwandoh likely saw sailors unshackle the deceased or very ill, and take them up to the deck to be thrown overboard. During the entire transatlantic slave trade, two million Africans would not survive the brutal crossing. A miniscule number managed to die by choice, starving themselves or breaking free and jumping to their watery death so that their spirit would join their ancestors rather than wander alone in a foreign land for eternity (Patterson, 1982).

Amkwandoh was one of the five percent of captured Africans who were brought to the United States, as much larger numbers were shipped to the Caribbean and South America. His ship docked in Annapolis, Maryland, a wealthy town in the English colony during the late 17th century. As Amkwandoh’s ship came close to shore, people downwind of the seaport likely smelled a horrific stench indicative of an arriving slave ship, even before its mast peaked over the horizon. Once Amkwandoh was unloaded from the hull of the ship, he might have spent weeks in a holding center, being fed fatty foods to make him gain weight. Before he was brought up on a wooden platform and sold to a white man at a slave auction, he would have been oiled with animal fat to make him appear healthy.

In 1684, Amkwandoh was counted in the Maryland census. When the census taker took down his name, they wrote “Quando,” a mistake that could be explained because the first part of his name sounded like “I am.” From that moment forward, Amkwandoh and his descendants were known as the Quandos. Later, the name would be anglicized to ‘Quander,’ the modern spelling. Three descendants I worked with in this project listed ‘Quander’ as a family name.

From here, let’s turn to another family that would eventually join Amkwandoh’s descendents on the Quander family tree. These were the Carters, and they were enslaved at

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7 Idea suggested by Gloria Tancil-Holmes, descendant of Amkwandoh.
Mount Vernon, Virginia in the early eighteenth century. Suckey Bay and her daughters Rose and Nancy were three of about three hundred enslaved workers on the plantation. They were included in the one hundred people who “belonged” to George Washington, as the other two hundred were Martha’s from her first marriage. Suckey Bay was listed as a seamstress on George Washington’s plantation census. In the American South, the color of the enslaved Carter family’s skin would have determined the jobs they were forced to do. If the Carters had darker skin, they would have worked outside on the plantation, growing crops and tending animals. If they had lighter skin, they more likely worked in the main house. Their complexions would have earned them the derogatory label “mulatto,” derived from the Spanish/Portuguese word for “mule,” which referenced their mixed African and European ancestry. They would have served the Washington family on more intimate levels like maids and valets.

We know that the Carters were enslaved at Mount Vernon for several decades. Suckey Bay had her first daughter at the age of eleven, which suggests she, like many other enslaved women, survived sexual violence. After Washington passed away, Suckey Bay and her daughters were among the one hundred enslaved people who were freed in his will in 1799. Nancy left the plantation and married a Quander, introducing the Carters into the Quander family tree. For whatever reason, Suckey decided to stay at Mount Vernon for the last thirty years of her life. Perhaps she worked out a deal with the Washingtons, allowing her to work for pay. Maybe she decided her ties to the people at Mount Vernon were too strong to sever. Whatever the case, Mount Vernon was her home until she passed away, sometime after the 1830 census.

If we zoom out from the Carters and look at the entire Quander family, we can see they have deep roots in the Southern United States. The Quander family has experienced the birth and
entire life of the United States of America. They know that their country was built from enslaved labor. Many Quanders would become community leaders, living through the American Civil War and participating in the Civil Rights movement. Some Quanders had political interests, helping to shape the state of Virginia. Perhaps most astoundingly, the family has managed to stay connected for over three hundred years, carving a notable identity for themselves as one of the oldest documented African American families in the United States.

This may seem like a short summary of one American family, but it is meant to give us a taste of a broader story—that of the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery in the United States of America. By situating ourselves briefly in a historical context, we can better understand where the enslaved people originated from, as well as how they arrived in America on plantations like Mount Vernon. By looking specifically at the Quander family, we can remember that these historical events are not just an American story, but also family stories.

Theoretical Framework

Issues of representation and truth about slavery at Mount Vernon tie into ideas expressed in works stemming from a wide range of disciplines. The major themes in this work are the relationship between history and heritage, asserting alternate narratives of the past, and groups in power asserting the dominant narrative. These themes revolve around issues of the past and its relationship with truth, identity and power. While I will address this in the body of this paper, it is important to first discuss a selection of relevant texts. In doing so, we can see what has been addressed, where the gaps are, and how my work fits into a wider body of literature on memorialization.
I. History and Heritage: How a Dominant Narrative is Created

How do we remember the past, and what do we want the next generation to learn? These questions concerning how and why the dominant narrative gets told must be condensed for my purposes. Here, I look at select relevant works that explore the production of history and the ongoing battle between what is remembered and what is forgotten.

Ruth M. Van Dyke and Susan E Alcock tackle the concept of social memory, or the construction of a collective understanding within a specific group about the nature of the past (2003:2). They argue that social memory is never monolithic. This type of memory is variable within a culture depending on social identity, for example race, gender or class. This provides leeway for conflicting versions of the past within a culture, which is the focus of my study. I will analyze the generational transmission of cultural memory within the social identity of being a descendent of a slave at Mount Vernon.

This cultural fragmentation is what Edwin M. Yoder describes as a “crisis of history,” or, this need to protect “American history” from plurality. Yoder describes this desire as a contradiction within communities, and even within individuals. We want to protect and instill the American Spirit in the next generation, but this concept is linked to heritage, or collective truths that are not based in fact. Historians, he argues, have a common mission to distance themselves from the master narrative of American history, yet do so to the discomfort of many Americans who cherish the idea of a single shared past. Paul A. Shackel addresses how two different versions of the past have wrestled to be heard in the context of Harper’s Ferry, a key Civil War town. The two different versions are that of civil war soldiers and war heroes and that of the civilians living in Harper’s Ferry at the time. This situation, eerily similar to Mount Vernon, is a battle for dominance. As Shackel explains, “the heroics of war overshadow a different form of
heroics (xi).” In what he calls “the assassination of plurality,” a collective memory can threaten the “legitimacy” of different versions of the past. A single memory is crafted and enforced to create a uniform version of the past. Using archaeology the same way as I will use descendant narratives, he argues that we need to expand our understandings of a national story. There are many valuable ways an event could be interpreted.

Shackel’s inclusionary approach does not reconcile with David Lowenthal, who picks apart how heritage is conceptualized, crafted, owned and encouraged in our modern world. In what he calls “the spoils of history,” heritage differs so far from historical realities, or “what really happened,” that it is something else altogether. His interpretation of heritage is dangerous because it devalues narratives like oral histories. History, he writes, is shaped and controlled by evidence, while heritage is quite flexible, an untestable declaration of faith in a shared past. Heritage, as opposed to history, allows for bias, embellishment and fabrication to thrive, unscrutinized by fact checkers because it cannot be proven. He states, “heritage today is a popular cult, almost a religious faith (1998: 6).” Heritage is a tool, a cultural right and legacy meant to be passed down to the next generation. Heritage exists as a separate type of truth that is crafted and used to establish cultural, communal or familial ties. “To share a legacy,” Lowenthal writes, “is to belong to a family, a community, a race, a nation (1998:2).” His perspective might aid and reinforce the dominant narrative, but it dismisses alternate narratives as folkloric inaccuracies. Most of all, I reject Lowenthal’s argument to protect History, because I don’t believe the purely objective narrative can exist. I believe pitting History and heritage against each other is dangerous because it undervalues the plurality of truth.

Lowenthal argues that heritage is closely linked with filial and paternal metaphors, as “we trace admired group traits to ancestral deeds and seeds…the king is the fond father, the
Lowenthal’s theory suggests that George Washington embodies the heroic birth of the American nation, which is an event that paved the way to a collective American identity. While I don’t agree with his main argument, this analysis of George Washington is useful in understanding the need to fuel a dominant narrative.

Historian Henry Wiencek (2003) elaborates on this concept of the deification of a founding father, as he writes of Washington’s god-like status in tandem with his life-long identity as a slave owner. Wiencek examines the contradictions that Washington the person brings to the image of Washington, the American god. In doing so, he paints an eloquent picture of a conflicted individual behind the romanticized deity. I believe Wiencek does not go far enough in critiquing Washington’s deified status. At the end of his analysis, the first president is exposed as imperfect, but his “god-like” status remains intact. This does not allow for the enslaved of Mount Vernon to join the first president on equal footing as people.

I believe Longmore (1999) does a better job analyzing George Washington’s transformation into an American myth. He argues that Washington was very aware and in control of the development of his deified image. Longmore analyzes Washington as he performed his public self throughout his lifetime, crafting an image that future generations would hold on to. George Washington was a man of his time, because Anglo-Virginian society in this period made it very important for a social climber like Washington to receive public recognition and praise. Longmore separates the man from his image, a task that is important in my work as descendants try to counter the long idealized myth.

The myth of Washington is integral to “American History.” Grade school children and aspiring citizens must learn that George Washington is the father of our country. Written records disprove the myth that Mason Locke Weems created when he wrote that Washington chopped
down a cherry tree and said, “I cannot tell a lie.” However, Lowenthal argues that these myths are deeply linked with ancestral ties and a common American morality. This morality, he argues, is viewed as a cultural heirloom tying group members to this shared past. This is inline with what Pierre Nora (1996) calls a *lieux de memoire*. Any significant material or non-material human creation may be defined as the heritage of any community. Facts of history, he argues, are usually events of the past transformed into cultural memory. National identity is defined by cultural memory, which in turn redefines historical events and places. He states, "moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, nor yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded” (Nora, 1999:12). Heritage takes on new purpose as those belonging to the community transform memory to meet the needs of the present. For example, Barry Schwartz (1991) discusses how George Washington, a non-democrat, was transformed into a symbol of democratic virtue after the Civil War as an image of reconciliation. Who George Washington was in his lifetime did not matter in this case, as he came to represent something else entirely.

Zelinsky (1998) also explores this deification of the founding fathers, placing further emphasis on American patriotism, and the powerful symbolic nature that past events have on modern Americans. Heritage, he argues, has much to do with shaping how Americans relate to their national identity. Bodnar (1991) adds to this by discussing the conflicting interests of “official” versus “vernacular” histories. Official histories use heritage as a tool of social control, while vernacular histories are almost always in tension with these. While his discussion of official versus vernacular is thematically similar to mine, his description of two groups of people, the “cultural leaders” and the “ordinary people” is too clean cut. He does not allow for the presence of fragmented narratives within the same social groups.
Thus, these works have a common theme of heritage and history as deeply intertwined subjects that support as well as challenge each other in the quest for truth about the past. While Lowenthal argues that these can be separated from each other, there are many who disagree with him, myself included. I believe that the nature of how knowledge is crafted and established, brings too many problems to Lowenthal’s distinction. The looming question behind these debates and their contributions to the evolution of historical truths is: can we ever separate our heritage from official history? Regarding alternate and dominant narratives of slavery at Mount Vernon, I argue that the “objective story” seems to not exist.

II. Protecting the Dominant Narrative

Often, supporters of the dominant narrative of the American past discredit alternate narratives to preserve their own beliefs. My work focuses on the power struggles surrounding one institution as staff attempt to solidify an idealistic image of George Washington in visitor’s minds. The following works complement this by looking at how the struggle to protect heritage has surfaced and played out in other contexts. Many of these scholars argue that the dominant narrative is a social and political tool that needs to be defended. Through the pervasiveness of contestation of different narratives, we are left with the question, ‘can there really be only one narrative of the past?’

Susan Crane (1997) looks at museums as sites where individual expectations and institutional, academic intentions often collide. Visitors bring their own feelings and memories to a museum which in turn shape how they experience and remember the exhibit. Crane describes emotional and fragmented memories as often skewed or “inaccurate,” painting institutions as careful mediators between visitors and historical facts. She states, “Personal memory may reject
historical information. Who wants to tell a Holocaust survivor that their memories are “wrong?” (313). I find her approach one-sided, as it does not tackle the skewed institutional perspectives that are often at play. Distortion, she argues, comes from the visitors into an exhibit, while I would argue that distortion just as often starts from the staff.

Eric Gable (2008) exemplifies this in his ethnographic analysis of Monticello, Thomas Jefferson’s home. He argues that museums often want to control “official history,” but must adapt to the needs and expectations of visitors. Monticello staff in the late 1980s and early 1990s struggled on a daily basis to defend their celebratory narrative of Jefferson, which was threatened by growing publicity of the Jefferson-Hemings liaison. Monticello staff tactfully took an “ostensibly non-committal” approach, which seemingly allowed for contestation while at the same time favoring Eurocentric forms of “serious scholarship” (Gable, 2008). This strategy protects the dominant narrative while at the same time appearing inclusive, a strategy that is also used at Mount Vernon.

Eric Foner and Edwin Yoder suggest that guilt and shame influence the re-writing of historical truths. Yoder (1997) examines how History is used (and abused), as a political tool, engulfing the historian, or the historical chronicler, in an ongoing social struggle to determine what pieces of the past are useful to remember in the present. Foner also looks at History as a political tool, yet differs from Yoder by taking a historiographical approach. He writes,

There is nothing sinister or evil in the fact that each generation rewrites history to suit its own needs, or about disagreements within the profession and among the public at large about how history should be best taught and studied (Foner, 2002: xi).

However, Yoder challenges the concept of using history as a tool in the present. Using the example of the founding fathers, he argues that the elusive idealistic history of Thomas Jefferson, thwarts the concept of Jefferson as an individual with flaws. In other words, Yoder, just like
Lowenthal, strives for this separation of history and heritage. While Lowenthal writes, “I acquit heritage of historians’ charges not because heritage is guiltless of deforming history, but because its function is to do just that” (106), Yoder might disagree, saying that we should discard heritage as merely folktales and embrace history as the only appropriate way to document the past. Both are in favor of asserting Eurocentric modes of research as the only way to “accurately” remember the past. I on the other hand suggest that alternate narratives have a right to be accepted and respected on an equal level as “official history.”

When grief, shame and the need for reconciliation enter this discussion, the battle between dominant and alternate truths becomes even more tangible. Linenthal edits *History Wars*, a collection of essays addressing the contestation behind the development of an exhibit displaying the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan in 1945. This exhibit split Americans into two main camps. On one hand there were those who thought the Enola Gay should be enshrined as a symbol of the end of World War II, the necessary evil that prevented the loss of more American lives. The other camp, however, detested the idea of enshrining the plane that killed hundreds of thousands and ushered in a new era of atomic warfare. Edward Linenthal writes, “the exhibit script would become a lightning rod in a bitter contest over the relationship between memory and history, as well as between celebratory and critical stances toward the American experience generally” (1996: 27).

This controversy echoes that of the history of American slavery. How can you seek the “truth” in a contested history? One group’s truth is another group’s lie. Michel-Rolph Trouillot supplements this in his analysis of how western scholars have failed to acknowledge the most successful slave revolt in Haitian history (1995). Additionally, Peter Novick brings up the question of historical truth, which has undergone significant debate over the last century,
reaffirming the idea that the nature of truth telling is not a new idea. These works raise the question—does there really have to be one dominant truth in common spaces like museums and historical sites like Mount Vernon?

The above literature situates us in a diverse discussion about the past and its relationship to the present. It serves to show how the debate between narratives is not new, or unique. The very concept of a singular dominant narrative versus multiple alternate narratives is what is playing out in the context of Mount Vernon. Will Mount Vernon be able to continue its singular narrative of George Washington and slavery, or will alternate narratives succeed in asserting themselves as part of the discussion? What my project highlights is the heightened tension between narratives of the past, when the reputation of the nation’s founding father is what’s at stake. This provides increased resistance, which is why descendants of slaves at Mount Vernon are struggling to have any sort of voice at Mount Vernon.

III. Alternate Narratives, “Truth,” and the Quest for Reconciliation

Many scholars are moving away from the linear narrative in favor of diverse perspectives. W. E. B. Dubois is perhaps the founder of this academic movement in the United States. Throughout his life, Dubois was interested in how plural alternate narratives can be pieced together to reconstruct a new framework for American history. In *Black Reconstruction* (1935), Dubois argues that the many voices of enslaved people and free Black laborers create a more rounded representation of the Reconstruction of the South after the Civil War. Dubois critiques White historians who marginalize Black voices in analyses of this time period, arguing that these are racist perspectives. I find Dubois’s appreciation for plurality valuable in understanding the history of slavery at Mount Vernon.
Arjun Appadurai (1981) also analyzes how certain narratives become marginalized. He argues that there is a universal debate within cultures concerning how to tell their own histories. This debate originates from the concept of *substantive* variations of the past, meaning culturally valued modes of history telling, and the minimal *formal* constraints on all these variations. To be “valid,” each historical truth must be able to prove its authority through culturally defined modes of proof, sustain itself through long periods of time, contain a general cultural consensus of truth, and match up and support other truths told about the cultural history. All these sustain the credibility of a historical truth.

Hayden White furthers this idea of the quest for historical truth. He asks,

What is involved, then, in that finding of the “true story,” that discovery of the “real story” within or behind the events that come to us in the chaotic form of “historical records?” What wish is enacted, what desire is gratified, by the fantasy that real events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherency of a story? (1987: 4).

White argues that these stories are products of possible conceptions of historical narrative—no reality tells itself as we might be inclined to believe. Rather, they are culturally defined as real. We value the narrative because it is a mode through which we display morality. Thus, it becomes a form of moral authority. Therefore, he asks, “Can we ever narrativize without moralizing?” (25).

Erika Doss expands on this collective need to moralize the past through acts of memorialization. She describes how in the last twenty years, thousands of public monuments have sprouted up all over the United States, memorializing pride, grief and shame. In her critique on American memorialization she describes an “obsession with issues of memory and history and an urgent desire to express and claim those issues in visibly public contexts” (2012: 2). She asks the question, ‘who and what are Americans publically memorializing, and why?’ Bodnar (1993) complements Doss’s argument by examining how commemoration of past events tells
more about political issues of the present than they do about the past. However, he diverges from Doss by emphasizing commemoration more as a political tool than an attempt at unity. In an America struggling to define itself and its national purpose in a rapidly changing demographic, communal and national unity seems highly desired. Memorials, Doss argues, help fulfill this common desire for national connection.

A shared desire for national unity echoes the concept of the “grand narrative.” In a way, the grand narrative acts as a monument, a public expression of national unity, yet many seek to destroy it. The grand narrative is Eurocentric, it tells us of the English pilgrims, the founding fathers and that Lincoln freeing the slaves. It doesn’t encompass the histories or celebrate the heritages of all Americans. Therefore, the contestations amongst historians that were described above, as well as the American public, speak to the charged challenges we face today in documenting “American history.”

On a similar note, Maurice Halbwachs (1992) looks at how mental images of the present help define and reconstruct versions of the past in his work On Collective Memory, which further reinforces how knowledge and understanding of the past and present is structured from imagery and memory. These various constructions of collective memory amongst different groups creates divergent understandings of the past and thus conflict in the present. Additionally, the collection of essays in Imagined Histories comment on the construction of a singular American history, stripping away a singular “American” voice to allow for the voices of many to be heard (Molho, Wood, 1998).

Alternative modes of truth telling create an undercurrent that questions dominant versions of truth. Nowhere is this clearer than with oral histories, which are closely linked to the concept of family history and heritage. Lynn Abrams (2010) describes oral history as collected both
during and after the interview, shaped by the questions of the researcher and the answers of the narrator. But oral history is often mistrusted in relation to the “provable methods,” the ones grounded in written data or other hard evidence. Oral history, she argues is best served to study the individual and their relationship with their own history, to understand how the self is constructed. However, Perks and Thomson (2010) suggest broader uses of the oral history, as memory that can be transmitted through generations, or speak to commonalities amongst individuals and communities. These writers seem more comfortable than Abrams in letting the oral histories of individuals speak for larger groups, for issues that transcend the scope of the single person. Elizabeth Tonkin calls for a better understanding of the value of oral narratives in academia, arguing that oral accounts of the past best show us how to approach events in the future (1992). Her approach empowers the oral narratives of descendants, allowing one person’s words to speak for greater social issues at Mount Vernon. Thus, these books address heated debates amongst oral historians today: what are the appropriate ways to use oral history, and who can we let these stories speak for, wider groups or exclusively the narrator?

I side with Alessandro Portelli (1990) when he argues that oral narratives offer valuable windows into collective symbolic, psychological and formal needs. The memory with manipulated facts and chronology can tell us much about the present. He looks at the altered oral accounts of the death of Luigi Trastulli, an Italian steel worker in 1949 to show how factual “inaccuracies” reveal deeper social truths. He argues:

If oral sources had given us “accurate,” “reliable,” factual reconstructions of the death of Luigi Trastulli, we would know much less about it. Beyond the event as such, the real and significant historical fact which these narratives highlight is the memory itself. (1990: 26).

Portelli showcases the value that oral narratives (even the “factually inaccurate” ones) can have in revealing social dynamics in the present. In doing so, he creates a more fluid understanding of
truth and memory, which is essential to understanding divergent narratives of slavery at Mount Vernon.

Thus, the construction of collective histories often does not allow for the equality of plural narratives. As we can see, many scholars have looked at the politics behind constructing a “grand narrative.” Others value the plurality and intimacy that oral narratives offer. All these works look at the ways in which a collective memory is constructed while also shedding light on the power struggle between the dominant narrative and plural alternate narratives. Thus, these perspectives are key to understanding the ongoing battle of narratives at Mount Vernon.

**Prospectus**

Chapter Two discusses how written documents are crucial for descendants wishing to revive stories of enslaved ancestors at Mount Vernon. This chapter is concerned with memories of slavery reclaimed through written documentation. Most of the descendants I interviewed have used written documents to reclaim a piece of their family history that instills a kind of memory based in pride, pain and general knowledge of slavery and plantation life in the 18th century. I will show how these perspectives can enrich the story of slavery at Mount Vernon by basing this chapter on descendant stories of discovery and reconnection with Mount Vernon.

Chapter Three deals with a heated controversy between descendants and Mount Vernon staff: West Ford’s paternity. Ford descendants claim that he was the son of George Washington, as the family has passed down this secret through the generations since Ford’s time. However, Mount Vernon’s staff members disagree, supporting their argument using Eurocentric understandings and validations of history. I use interviews with both descendants of West Ford and with Mount Vernon staff, as well as the books, websites, articles and blogs written about the
controversy to compare the conflicting opinions. Next, I discuss what I term ‘living heirlooms,’ oral histories passed down through generations. I bring in other descendant perspectives of the debate, which show a spectrum of opinions, to argue that there is no single truth about West Ford.

Chapter Four focuses on the major efforts of Mount Vernon staff and descendants to work together to present slavery to the public. It focuses on the slave burial ground monument construction, which was the first major collaboration between descendants and staff. The central themes of this chapter are about reconciliation, and cooperation. It highlights the fact that Mount Vernon has made some efforts to include slavery into the discussion of Mount Vernon’s history over the last few decades, since the building of the slave burial monument in 1983. However, there is little reconstruction in the burial ground, or an emotionally supportive discussion of the contradictions inherent in George Washington owning slaves.

The concluding chapter highlights the plurality of voices that speak of slavery at Mount Vernon. I argue that divergence and fragmentation are key to understanding the past at Mount Vernon. Alternate and dominant narratives of slavery stand in tension with one another. As a result, the “complete story” can never exist.
CHAPTER TWO: Descendant Journeys

This chapter is the heart of the project. It is here that descendants tell their life stories of discovering intimate connections with a “famous” place, as well as journeys towards reclaiming family stories through written records. These are the oral histories I have sought after, and that have molded this project since the beginning. I do not present these narratives as pieces of a whole, but simply pieces that can contradict or complement each other. They do not necessarily fit together. Here, I refrain from heavy analysis of any individual or story, as I do not believe it is my place to take over these family histories with theory and personal opinions. Rather, at the end of this chapter I will discuss how these narratives fit into larger themes of divergent narratives of slavery. I present the following stories as alternate narratives in relation to the dominant narrative of Mount Venron. These reinforce the idea that truth about slavery is fractured within families as well as amongst descendants, in relation to Mount Vernon, and in the construction of “American History.”

I have broken this chapter into sections dedicated to each descendant, or two whose lives are intimately connected. I try my best to tell family stories as they were told to me, letting each descendant command their space. The reader must understand, however, that my own biases are undoubtedly reflected in the stories I have chosen to include. Additionally, each descendant shared more family history in our interviews than I could reasonably incorporate. Yet, each descendant has a unique story to tell, reaffirming the idea that conducting an excavation into your own family history is a deeply personal experience. In the following sections, I will introduce you to the family history journeys of seven descendants: Zunny, Steve, Gloria, Rohulamin, Loretta, Bernita and Donald.
Zunny’s Story: Embracing Family Secrets

Zunny turned her family story into a suspenseful mystery in our interview using the words her grandmother always told to her, "if the truth about our family was told it would topple the first families of Virginia." A vivacious, free spirited grandmother herself, Zunny did not learn of her connection to Mount Vernon through her own family. Growing up, Zunny asked questions that weren’t answered, as if she were jiggling the knob of a locked closet where she knew older generations had stuffed the family skeletons. To no avail, the haunting words her grandmother told to her were the only clue she had that there was a very juicy family secret. Years later, Zunny caught her first big break at the Alexandria Black History Museum in Virginia. By spotting a painting of her Great-Great Grandfather, the family closet doors finally swung open, and Zunny was able to reclaim her family history though written records.

I found out about it in such an unusual way…there was a framed picture and it said Robert Henry Robinson. So I looked at it and I said, to the archivist, "so would he happen to be related to Magnus George Washington?" (Who I knew was my father's mother's father). And she said, "yes, that's his father." I said, "that is my great-great grandfather!"...And she said, "well have a seat." And she went downstairs somewhere and came back up with some folders and plopped them on the desk and said, "Take it away." And there, I could see the library at the museum was named after Robert Henry Robinson. And I just said, "wow." And as I read, I finally ran into something that said 'Robert Henry Robinson was the grandson of Caroline Brannum, personal maid to Martha Washington.' I said, "to Martha Washington!!!”

The next day, Zunny contacted Mount Vernon with questions and was directed to Mary Thompson, the resident “slave life” historian. Mary and Zunny have been close friends ever since, based on their mutual interest in “slave life” at Mount Vernon. After their first conversation, Mary faxed over all the information she had on Caroline Brannum to Zunny. In return, Zunny would often call with any questions or information she had found herself.

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9 Transcribed phone interview with Zunny on July 26th, 2010. Lasted forty minutes. All subsequent quotes of Zunny come from this interview.
Zunny’s discovery that day led her on a life journey that has allowed her to empower herself by developing a strong intimacy with her seventh great-grandmother. Referring to her as “my Caroline,” in both writings and everyday conversations, Zunny is clearly proud of her ancestor, not just for her role in history but also for the strong woman she imagines her to have been. Zunny’s research using written records has compelled her to share her family story with Mount Vernon visitors by giving talks about her ancestry, reenacting her grandmother around the plantation and in an informational video featured at Mount Vernon, participating in several ceremonies celebrating the enslaved people of Mount Vernon, and working on a book about her ancestor.

While Zunny believed she had uncovered an incredible family skeleton that day at the Arlington Black History Museum, there was more. Several years into her discovery, Mary faxed Zunny a journal entry from one of George Washington’s visitors, which revealed the secret she believes her grandmother had always warned her about. The obscure journal entry had stated, “everybody knows Caroline’s daughter Lucy is the daughter of George Washington Parke Custis.” Thus, it would seem that Caroline’s intimate relationship with Mrs. Washington also stemmed from genetic ties, as Caroline’s daughter Lucy might be Martha’s great-granddaughter. As Lucy’s descendant, Zunny could very well be related to Martha Washington.

With no other documented proof of Lucy’s paternity, Zunny had to take this loaded information in good faith, until the day she was invited to commemorate the 200th anniversary of George Washington’s death at Mount Vernon. On December 14th, 1999 Zunny was invited to help reenact the death of George Washington. This event was exclusively held for known descendants of those individuals who were in the room when the first president passed away. As Martha’s personal handmaiden, Caroline was in and about George Washington’s room the night
he died. Besides Caroline, Martha, a doctor named Craik, and George’s secretary Mr. Lear were also in the room when Washington passed away. The MVLA invited select descendants of these individuals to this exclusive dinner and reenactment in 1999.

At the dinner, the descendants took turns introducing themselves and their ancestor. When it was Zunny’s turn, she told the group, “I am the only one here who is related to two of the people who were in the room: Caroline Brannum, and Martha Washington.” While she didn’t get a notable reaction at the time, a descendant of Martha Washington approached her privately later in the evening with a secretive confession. Below, Zunny describes this interaction.

At the Executive Director's home, as we were talking about many things, Mrs. Washington's granddaughter said to me, "we are aware that our grandfather, George Washington Parke Custis, had children with his slave women." And I was so shocked I almost wanted to drop to the floor! She just touched me lightly on the hand, said what she said and moved on! And I was in shock!

Zunny explained that her surprise was a result of the ingrained secrecy and taboo often associated with White men having children with enslaved women. Given that Parke Custis’s father was adopted by the first president, and thus considered a Washington, it was even more shocking that Martha’s descendant admitted he had fathered children with enslaved women. To Zunny, this was momentous and unforgettable, because she had acknowledged the possibility that the two of them could share DNA. The next day, Zunny called Mary to talk about the encounter. Mary, as giddy as Zunny, quickly contacted Martha’s descendant to ask if she wished to clarify anything she had said. The descendant apparently refused to divulge any more information.

While Zunny is frustrated with the Custis family for withholding information about her ancestry, she holds fast to her alleged heritage. For now, she claims to find solace in the abundance of documentation “proving” George Washington Parke Custis fathered another daughter, Maria Syphax. Custis apparently claimed Maria as his daughter, as he taught her to
read and write, married her off in his home, as well as freed her and gave her land in his will. Thus, if Custis had one daughter by a slave woman, whose to say he didn’t have two?

While Zunny has pulled two major skeletons out of her family closet, there is so much she still doesn’t know. Her father’s family remains guarded when it comes to Zunny’s quest to learning about her family history, something she attributes to lasting pain from the legacy of slavery. Yet Zunny sees this guarded approach outside of her family as well, particularly with Mount Vernon visitors who are unsure how to ask questions about slavery. She describes this hesitancy and unease using an example from the summer of 2010, when she was reenacting Caroline at her ancestral home.

They were doing a story in the Washington Post about me, and visitors were asking, oh "what's that?" Staff said. "Oh this woman," you see they were taking photos of me in the slave cabin, they said, "oh she is an actual descendant." And the guests replied, "oh, really?" I knew they had questions! And they are so afraid they're going to feel guilty in some way. But they shouldn't, it's history.

To Zunny, family skeletons as well as the skeletons of American history should not be locked in closets, hidden away from the world. Knowledge and openness about a painful past can be empowering. What is frustrating and painful for Zunny is that information about her own ancestry can be withheld, by groups like Mount Vernon and the Custis family. Family stories should not be locked in closets, no matter how unflattering they might be for Mount Vernon. Learning these secrets and embracing ancestry, Zunny argues, is a healthier way of healing from the hurt and guilt inherited from past generations.

**Steve’s Story: Rekindling Family Ties**

In a Starbucks in Old Alexandria, Steve burst in toting several heavy books and what looked like a rolled up map. “Chelsea?” He asked loudly to the whole cafe. After a long and
congested drive to meet me, Steve was impressively collected. A strong, wise and patient father of two college-age daughters, Steve gave off the aura of a leader. This, I quickly learned, connected him to past generations of his Syphax family history, as there were many trailblazing leaders in his family. These strong personalities were able to overcome obstacles of slavery and racism to do powerful things with their lives. Many Syphaxes became politicians, lawyers and doctors in eras when being Black made that significantly difficult. Early into our conversation, he introduced me to his extended family by unrolling a massive family tree that covered about a fourth the length of the small cafe.

As Steve walked me through his family tree, he explained why he wasn’t sure he was the right person for me to speak to, as the extended Syphax family had several different lineages, only one of them having ties to the Arlington House and Mount Vernon. He was not descended from this branch. However, Steve had done extensive research on the whole family tree, and clearly felt strong ties to the Arlington House and by extension, Mount Vernon. Through this, it became clear to me that being a descendant of a person enslaved at Mount Vernon was not about DNA as much as it is about a bond with this space through a family story.

Steve explained that the Arlington House was George Washington Parke Custis’s home in what is now Arlington Cemetery. The family line descends through Maria Syphax, who is believed to be his daughter.\textsuperscript{10} According to Steve, as well as the official website of the Arlington House Museum, Custis openly acknowledged that Maria was his daughter. Parke Custis inherited land in Arlington when George Washington died. Maria grew up in Arlington, was married to Charles Syphax inside the main house, and later inherited fifteen acres of land in the northwest

\textsuperscript{10} See Arlington House official webste: http://www.nps.gov/arho/historyculture/syphax.htm
corner of the Arlington estate in Parke Custis’s will when he passed away. As Steve explained in our interview:

We know that that’s the connection to George Washington Parke Custis. We believe that Charles Syphax belonged to George Washington before he was given to George Washington Parke Custis. One of the things that we're working to do is to clearly document how those pieces fit back to Mount Vernon.\textsuperscript{11}

The picture of Maria Syphax strongly suggests she had a higher social status than the average enslaved person at the Arlington House, or Mount Vernon for that matter, as very few photographs of enslaved people exist. Maria’s unusually high status as a slave was further exemplified as the government started collecting land around the Arlington house for what would later become Arlington Cemetery. As the government attempted to seize Maria’s land for the cemetery in 1866, an elderly Maria had to go to court to protect her inheritance, where she had lived for more than forty years. Her son William represented her when a bill was introduced in the Senate, titled “The Bill for the Relief of Maria Syphax.” The incredible situation of an African American woman challenging the federal government was cause for much speculation amongst senators debating the bill. As one senator from the Committee on Private Land wrote of the matter:

Mr. Custis, at the time she [Maria] married about forty years ago feeling an interest in the woman, something \textit{perhaps akin to a paternal instinct}, manumitted her, and gave her this piece of land. It has been set apart to her, and it has been occupied by her and her family for forty years. Under the circumstances the Committee thought it no more than just, the government having acquired title to this property under a sale for taxes, that this title should be confirmed to her (italics added).\textsuperscript{12}

Maria’s bill was passed, and the Syphax family lived on the land for many more years. The fact that Maria won this case in 1866, as an African American woman was a testament to her known

\textsuperscript{11} Transcribed interview one with Steve on July 6\textsuperscript{th}, 2010. Lasted One hour.
\textsuperscript{12} Taken from the Syphax Family Reunion website: \url{http://www.syphaxfamilyreunion.com/tree.html}
Quote from interview one with Steve.
connection to George Washington Parke Custis. While the government did not admit they knew about Maria’s father, the above quote implies that they were very much aware of her paternity.

In July of 2011, Steve urged that I visit the Arlington House museum that was undergoing major renovations. The museum was open to the public, but in an incomplete capacity. In the July heat, the Arlington House and the surrounding gardens seemed a lush haven from the expansive cemetery below, and the country’s capital in the visible distance. Having found no mention of Lucy at Mount Vernon, I was very interested in comparing how George Washington Parke Custis’s alleged daughters were presented at the historical homes they were associated with. Notably, most of the museum’s discussion of Maria Syphax’s paternity took place outside the Arlington House itself. This parallels Mount Vernon, as “slave discussions” are mostly removed from the Main House. In a temporary building adjacent to the house, half a wall showcased the extensive Syphax family tree that Steve helped put together for a family reunion in 2009. George Washington Parke Custis is on the family tree, listed as the father of Maria, who married Charles Syphax. Together, Charles and Maria had seventeen children.¹³

Inside the Arlington House, photos of the Parke Custis family and other members of the household decorated the walls above construction debris. Maria Syphax’s picture hung amongst friends of the family, with the words said in passing, “Maria Syphax, who according to Syphax family tradition was Mrs. Lee’s half sister...” This is a very roundabout way of discussing Mariah’s alleged paternity. Additionally, she is excluded from the official Washington family tree, a large and detailed diagram of George Washington Parke Custis’s family. Thus, while the Arlington House is willing to go further than Mount Vernon in the discussion of Washington children born to enslaved women, Arlington is still unwilling to call Maria Syphax a Washington.

¹³ This family tree is the same one Steve showed me during our interview.
This hesitancy was apparent during the first ever Syphax family reunion in 2009. The Arlington House museum hosted the extended Syphax family for a few hours before they made their way to Mount Vernon. Steve, as one of the organizers of this event, describes it below.

It was on the last day of the reunion, we had a bus tour for about 85 people. We had two large motor coaches and we went to Arlington National Cemetery to tour the Arlington house in the morning. And we all took our picture on the front step [see image below]. That was really pretty neat. And so we had a tour of the main house as well as the slave quarters. And we weren’t really impressed with the tour at the time, and it looked that they weren’t quite ready for us when we got there, but the national park service gave us that tour.\textsuperscript{14}

Despite the apparent disorganization of the tour in 2009, the Arlington House did offer extensive information on Maria and Charles Syphax. For instance, the National Park Service tour guide showed the Syphax family where Maria and Charles were married, which was under a doorway in the main house. George Washington Parke Custis apparently had been in attendance. While the museum made this information available to the Syphax family, Maria’s story is otherwise not well represented in the Arlington House itself. Although her picture hangs on the wall, little else is told to the general public about this African American woman and her genetic connection to the Washington family.

Thus, while there is written documentation supporting the notion that Custis fathered at least two mixed race daughters, both Mount Vernon and the Arlington House do not discuss this history with the American public. The records are there for analysis, yet they are left uninterpreted. Rather, these truths are glossed over in the dominant narrative of Mount Vernon. These dark-skinned women are left out of the grand portrait of a revolutionary war hero’s extended White family.

\textsuperscript{14} Transcribed interview two with Steve, his wife and daughter at his home on July 12th, 2010. Lasted one hour.
Steve’s life journey cataloguing family histories seemed more about personal connections than it was about proving anything to the American public. Steve seemed unfazed by the politics of history telling surrounding his ancestor. His desire to rekindle family ties with the larger Syphax family seemed not to include George Washington Parke Custis’s White descendants. They were not listed on the Syphax family tree, just as Maria was not listed on the Custis family tree. For whatever reason, these Black and White descendants of George Washington Parke Custis are not ready to call each other family.

For Steve, his ties to the Arlington House and Mount Vernon appeared no more important than any other family story. To him, it was more about filling in the pieces to reconnect with extended family. He stressed the value of preserving memories held by older generations, by asking and answering questions about a shared family past. Most importantly, Steve uses his passion for research into generations long gone as a tool to meet the living.

**Gloria and Rohulamin’s Stories: A Journey Toward Reconciliation**

In her spacious sunroom decorated with white furniture, Gloria Tancil Holmes gently turned the pages of her family photo album. The yellowed pictures lit up against the black background, calling attention to each face. She introduced me to her family members in turn, tracing back the generations to times of slavery. With each new face, she had a story of generations past, which her elders had once told to her. When she came across a picture of her mother’s grandfather, Charles Henry Quander, she recounted how he had learned to read from Union soldiers camping in the woods outside his master’s home. This secret skill eventually allowed him to claim his freedom from his master who had failed to tell the enslaved population on his farm that the north won the civil war.
My great-grandfather was not a house slave... but he was able to read enough to know that he was free! So he went to his slave owner and he said, "Mr. Johnston, freedom has come!" ... And so my great-grandfather's slave owner got quiet, and he said, "yes Henry, I know slavery has ended. Take your freedom. Tell the rest of them they can take theirs."

A commanding presence, Gloria quickly corrected me when I did not use the word ‘slave’ to describe her ancestors. At the beginning of the interview, I described how excited I was to meet “descendants,” that summer. “Call me a descendant of slaves,” she said, “I’m not ashamed of my ancestry.” To her, the topic of slavery should be discussed directly as an important part of American history. Thus, my description of her identity was too euphemistic. This mentality seemed reminiscent of past generations of Quanders who chose to work for Mount Vernon, the plantation where several of their ancestors had been enslaved. Gloria’s grandmother, mother and aunt served at a bi-annual MVLA conference. Gloria’s mother, Gladys Quander Tancil started working as a tour guide for Mount Vernon after she retired from her career as a government employee, and continued to work at Mount Vernon for twenty-seven and a half years.

During her long working relationship with Mount Vernon, Gladys became a key figure in helping to shape the way her ancestors’ stories were told to visitors. Her position at Mount Vernon was outstanding not just because her ancestor Nancy Quander was an enslaved seamstress for the Washington family, but also because she was the first African American interpreter to work for Mount Vernon. In April of 1995, Mount Vernon created a “slave life” tour on their grounds conducted twice a week, and Gladys was the first tour guide to ever give it. As Gloria described below, her mother also thought it necessary to confront the painful history of slavery directly.

She'd do tours, and her favorite was the slave tour. People would ask for her, all over the world for slave tours because she would give an accurate story about the slaves. Slavery is not a beautiful part of history, and sometimes the White guides would have a tendency
to make it sound a little bit less harsh. My mother used to tell me that the interpreters had
certain things that they were supposed to tell. And one of the things was that George
Washington provided a certain number of fish each day and a certain amount of cornmeal
each day for each slave. Well, sometimes the White guides would try to make it sound a
little better. If they were supposed to say “five fish,” you know, they’d make the fish go
up to ten. My mother would tell it as it was. And then she would also talk about the fact
that she had ancestors that had lived there, and how hard slavery was.

Several newspaper articles were written about Gladys’s role at Mount Vernon, including one that
stated:

Mount Vernon is more sacred shrine than historic landmark. It is a place that celebrates
American mythology. . . . But two days every week, Gladys Quander Tancil is subverting,
or at least editing, the myth, reminding visitors about the other residents of the
plantation—the ones whose names are not recorded in any books, much less history
books (Henderson, 1995).

During an interview for the previous article, Gladys stressed the absence of other Black
tour guides, and the negative impact that could have in the portrayal of slavery at Mount Vernon
(Henderson, 1995). Ten years later, one sociology dissertation noted no observation of Black
slave life tour guides at Mount Vernon (McGill: 2005, 4). In 2013, I asked a historian on slave
life at Mount Vernon of her own observations, and Henderson’s survey appears to still be the
case.

When Gladys passed away on November 5th, 2002, the flag at Mount Vernon was held at
half-mast in her honor. The Monday after her funeral, Mount Vernon employees held a
candlelight vigil, starting at the brick exterior of George Washington’s tomb, winding down the
cobblestone path to the slave memorial. This vigil, Gloria believes, has not been done for any
other employee. Gladys Quander Tancil had touched the hearts of many in the Mount Vernon
community. But along the way, she had also built a strong connection between her extended
Quander family tree and Mount Vernon. As a result, Gloria and her cousin Rohulamin Quander
are the first people asked to participate in ceremonies commemorating slave life at Mount Vernon. Rohulamin explained this relationship in detail in our interview.

A retired judge, Rohulamin welcomed me into his home amidst hectic preparation for his fraternity reunion at Howard University, the oldest Black College in the United States. Sitting down in matching red armchairs, I quickly observed that Rohulamin had the same commanding presence as his cousin Gloria. Rohulamin founded the Quander Historical Society as a way to pool information and reconnect family members, as he explains below.

I started the Quander Historical Society in 1984 when we were celebrating our tercentennial of three hundred documented years, 1684 to 1984, of the Quander family here in the Americas. So we had a grand celebration and it was at Howard University in Washington DC. We had several hundred people, some relatives, some friends to come through Howard University and celebrate that with us. And part of that heritage included the Quander family connection to George Washington and the Mount Vernon plantation. We are proud descendants of that particular heritage.15

Rohulamin has traced his family all the way back to the Fante people in modern day Ghana, weaving his way through generations of community leaders, through fascinating oral histories, through enslavement at Mount Vernon to the slave ship that brought his ancestor Amkwando to America. The 329 year-old ties to Amkwando’s transatlantic crossing can still be traced through written documents, making the Quander family one of the oldest documented Black families in the United States. The name Amkwando would be changed through the generations like a game of telephone, each parent whispering into their child’s ear a name that changed to Quando and then to Quander, the current spelling.

As one of the most diligent Quander family historians, Rohulamin also developed a 25-year long relationship with Mount Vernon.

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15 Transcribed interview with Rohulamin at his home on July 16th, 2010. Lasted one hour. All subsequent quotes of Rohulamin are from this interview.
My relationship with Mount Vernon is an ongoing relationship. I have been called upon and continue to be called upon to participate in workshops, public speaking, wreath-laying, to meet with students and professors and interns from time to time. And this is a legacy that I have enjoyed for the last 25 or so years, maybe more than that. And as long as god spares life and they are continuing their interest in having me come down, I am interested in going.

Rohulamin’s active relationship with Mount Vernon earned him invitations to participate in two dedication ceremonies for slave life projects at Mount Vernon. In 2007, ‘House for Families,’ a reconstruction of the main slave dwelling, was completed, and dedicated. Two descendants, Rohulamin and Zunny were invited to attend and speak about their ancestors. In excerpts of an article written about the event, Rohulamin stated, “Let's not fool ourselves into thinking that these accommodations were anything but the barest necessities (insidenova).” Indeed, the new replica is a generous depiction of how enslaved peoples lived. In a comparison of the House for Families (left) taken in 2007, and a picture taken in 1908 of what used to be a Mount Vernon slave cabin (right), we can see that the two are structurally similar. Mount Vernon staff worked off of archaeological findings and this picture to reconstruct the House for Families.

The reconstruction of this cabin was important to celebrate. During the dedication ceremony, representatives from the MVLA, and administrative staff spoke of the significance of the new slave cabin. The MVLA representative, Gay Hart Gaines said, “All of these additions are aimed at helping us tell the story of George Washington's career and private life (insidenova).” For her, Mount Vernon was still about telling George Washington’s story. An administrative staff member, Dennis Pogue added, "The final result, we believe, is a truly representative cabin of the type, the home for many of Mount Vernon's slaves.” Despite the different versions of how enslaved people had lived, and why this cabin had been reconstructed, the ceremony was still a time for staff and descendants to come together to share thoughts on slavery at Mount Vernon. To end the ceremony, Rohulamin and Zunny led visitors in throwing
dirt on trees with spoons made of Ghanaian gourd, a reminder of the origins of the people who had been forced to live and work on this plantation.

Three years later, in 2010, the green house slave quarters were rededicated. While the slave quarters had been rebuilt in the 1950s, it had grossly misrepresented how slaves lived. For example, depictions of slave diets, household appliances and sleeping arrangements told visitors that enslaved people lived very comfortably at Mount Vernon. A frustrated Gladys Quander Tancil often complained to her daughter that there was a model of a roasted chicken in the slave quarters, which was very inaccurate. While a few slaves did own turkeys and chickens, Gladys explained to Gloria, they would have been sold, not eaten. Just like the roasted chicken, other inaccuracies included china bowls and the large number of thick blankets depicted in the earlier slave quarters. Enslaved people used colonoware bowls, a type of ceramic made from accessible clay using knowledge brought from West Africa. They were able to expand their kitchenware collection quite literally from scratch (Ferguson, 1992). Therefore, the 1950s version of the slave quarters misrepresented slave life to visitors.

Therefore, the rededication ceremony in 2010 was a significant event for Mount Vernon, as well as for three descendants, Gloria, Rohulamin and Zunny’s young granddaughter. Staff at Mount Vernon asked each descendant to participate in the ceremony by placing objects of symbolic significance in the slave quarters. Amidst many flashing camera lights, Rohulamin placed a woven cap on a bed in the men’s quarters. With a large audience, Rohulamin explained that the cap was something a male field slave would have worn. Next, Gloria placed a colonoware bowl in the woman’s quarters. The third descendant asked to participate in the ceremony was Zunny’s six-year-old granddaughter. She placed a cloth doll in the slave quarters.

16 See video: ‘Revamped Slave Quarters Reopen’
to represent the enslaved children who would have occupied this space. During the ceremony, amongst the flashing lights, her smiling grandmother Zunny held her hand, whispered in her ear and pointed to where she should put the doll. With these words of encouragement, the girl made her way over to the floor near a cupboard.

Instances like the slave quarters rededication ceremony suggest a hopeful future of collaboration between slave descendants and Mount Vernon. However, these relationships are far from perfect. As both Rohulamin and Gloria explained to me, staff at Mount Vernon have made good strides over the years in presenting this history with more accuracy, but there is much more work to be done to create a more rounded picture. Gloria highlighted the residual tensions caused by slavery in Virginia by pointing out my own naïveté on the issue. When I mentioned in passing that I grew up in Washington State she replied, “You’re not even from this part of the country, so you have no idea about how there are remnants of what went on at that time that are still trying to exist today.” Thus, having met both Rohulamin and Gloria, it seemed clear that reconciliation between Mount Vernon and descendants is not a destination but a journey.

Loretta’s Story—Bringing History to Life

Loretta and her son welcomed me into her apartment one night, both clearly enthusiastic about the family stories I had come to ask her about. In the middle of a move, the 83 year-old Loretta made space for all of us in a room stacked high with boxes, having already neatly laid out dozens of papers relating to her family history. With a big smile on her face, the kind and vivacious Loretta talked so fast that I could only hope to catch every interesting thing she said when I transcribed the interview later. Below, she explains how family oral narratives spurred her to dig through written records and uncover a connection to Mount Vernon.
The oldest aunt in our family was Flossy Etta Carter Weaver. Upon her death, I found a treasure of documents. It was something that I could not believe because throughout my life she told us a lot of stories handed down from her family’s lives at Mount Vernon and at Gum Springs where they later lived…Her ancestors had passed the information down to her and she related them to me.\(^{17}\)

Much of this treasure was written down by George Washington himself, leading Loretta to make the fascinating analogy, “George Washington might have been your president, but he was our secretary.” Meaning, the meticulous first president made it possible for Loretta’s family to piece together their family stories through written records. Yet, there were other clues tying present generations to a shared past. For instance, Loretta describes how the tradition of giving a family member ceramic dishes with blue willow patterns as a wedding present can be traced all the way back to Mount Vernon.

All the dishes that you see at Mount Vernon, we have copies of the same pattern, the blue willow. And everybody who got married, you got a set of blue willows. We never knew why. But then later on we learned, when we started going down to Mount Vernon, that’s when we realized that that history was being passed down to us, the blue willow dishes.

Even the MVLA admired this family tradition. Loretta told how her aunt brought a blue willow butter dish to serve the ladies at their bi-annual meeting one year. One of the ladies, Alice Longfellow (1850-1928) asked Loretta’s aunt to donate her butter dish to Mount Vernon. However, her aunt refused to give up her mother’s wedding present, because it had had been in the family since 1856.

Loretta had a wealth of information that she threw out in fast waves, at an overwhelming speed. One oral history, for example, describes family members hiding their religious faith from George Washington, because he did not approve.\(^{18}\) Another story linked her genetically with

\(^{17}\) Transcribed interview with Loretta and her son at her home on July 20\(^{th}\), 2010. Lasted one hour. All subsequent quotes of Loretta are taken from this interview.

\(^{18}\) See video where Loretta briefly explains this oral history:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1fR8kKGCb8
Tobias Lear, George Washington’s personal secretary. The family matriarch, Suckey Bay, an enslaved woman at Mount Vernon had two daughters, Rose and Nancy. Rose, Loretta’s ancestor claimed that Lear fathered her children.

Fairfax County did not speak about us being connected to Tobias Lear. But the historian of Fairfax County, he was the one who put it down in the Smithsonian for the world to see. They put him in a corner for that. Because see, our George, he was very fair, he could pass for white. That was Rose's son, and she had brown skin. So when she went to the courthouse [to register her son] she said, "George Lear." And that's in the book. Down at the Smithsonian they put Tobias Lear down by every one of her children in parentheses. And the historian lost his job at Fairfax because of that.

For Loretta, collecting family stories is a life journey, about fastening herself tightly to her ancestors through the bonds of oral, written and tactile clues passed down through the generations. In a way, family history research is like reviving pieces of her own identity.

It is a spiritual journey that I've been on...because of my aunt and because of her love of passing the history on... And so everything in her life began to unfold and I just absorbed it...until you do your own family research, you never feel it...When you find your own family, it will be the most rewarding thing you can do...You are digging, you’re bringing up things that will help others to understand past histories that have been buried. And that’s what I like about history. You’re just bringing things to life.

Barely taking a breath, Loretta continued on through generations of stories, painting a beautiful family portrait and leaving me in awe of the breadth of genetic connections one family can have to a shared American past.

**Bernita and Donald’s Stories: Reviving Memories from Written Documents**

Bernita met me for coffee one night in Old Alexandria, toting a bulky folder full of information about her family history. A fast-talking grandmother, Bernita wasted no time delving into her family history, giving me copy after copy she had found while digging into her family’s past. The wealth of her knowledge was quite remarkable, as she swooped me up into a whirlwind
of dates and names she had memorized along the way. Bernita explained that she had to reconstruct her family history through written records, as the key link to her family past, her grandmother, was secretive about these things. Thus, Bernita discovered a possible family link to Mount Vernon by stumbling onto it after a visit about a decade ago.

I discovered that I might be a descendant of a slave at Mount Vernon quite by accident. I took some students on a field trip to Mount Vernon, I assisted a classroom teacher. We picked up quite a bit of literature and on the way back to the school I said, "okay lets look at our information that we collected so that tomorrow we can discuss it." And some of them did, some of them didn’t, so I said, "well I'll take my advice." So I was reading a particular brochure that they gave us, 'Colonial Days at Mount Vernon' and I happened to come to a page and it said, 'Housewrights and I said, "what is a housewright?" I read that a housewright is similar to a carpenter, and then it said, 'Tom Nokes was a slave trained as a housewright.' And I said, "Nokes?! Oh this couldn’t be!" Nokes is my mother's mother's family's maiden name. So I said, "Oh I can't believe this!"...I just stopped reading and I sat there for a while.¹⁹

Bernita had to prod her grandmother for clues into her family history. The woman she described as a loving caregiver had secrets she did not wish to share with her grandchildren. Bernita’s grandmother did not like to talk about her childhood, or what she called the “hard times when there wasn’t much.” This, Bernita blames on the painful scars of slavery and racism that are still visible in many Black families today. As we have seen, Zunny had a very similar experience in her own family. Therefore, when Bernita’s grandmother passed away, many stories were erased.

However, Bernita’s grandmother would occasionally divulge some information. Once, she verified that the Nokes side of the family tree has been in the Alexandria area for many generations. Since Nokes is not a common name, Bernita believes this likely means that she is related to Tom from Mount Vernon. Having found no written documentation linking her to Tom, Bernita continues to search through public records in county libraries for him and other family lost in time.

¹⁹ Transcribed interview with Bernita on July 15th, 2010. Lasted one hour. All subsequent quotes of Bernita are from this interview.
But Bernita is not alone in her search for buried family treasures through written
documents. Her younger cousin Donald, who was raised in the same house as their grandmother,
shares her passion for uncovering family histories. In our phone call, Donald explained that he is
working on a website that would consolidate all the information that ‘Nita,’ (his nickname for
Bernita) and he have put together over the last few decades.

Donald reminded me of Bernita, as he placed immense value on written records. He
described spending countless hours in courthouse and library records in the Washington DC area,
searching for any kind of clue or connection linking people together. For example, Donald
placed a lot of emphasis on a story about his ancestor Melvina Pinbrook’s emancipation, which
established a second connection to Mount Vernon. Pinbrook’s mother Susanna was an enslaved
handmaiden to a girl named Rosalee Stewart. Stewart’s mother’s first husband was Martha
Washington’s son. Rosalee, who was partially raised at Mount Vernon, married the founder of
Websters Dictionary. She apparently freed Pinbrook because she had deep admiration for
Susanna. The time Donald has spent uncovering connections and interactions between these
people, which span much further than genetic ties, shows his passion for reconstructing stories
through written records.

Bernita and Donald’s shared value of written records seems quite different to the way
Mount Vernon staff value them. These written records are their only link to their family’s past,
as many oral histories vanished when their grandmother passed away. Documents are precious to
Bernita and Don, but not because they value Eurocentric modes of history telling. Rather, the
cousins seem to immerse themselves in written documents in order to reclaim the oral histories
they were never told.
Donald discovered his possible link to Tom Nokes through Bernita, and has since become her partner in excavating family history. The two cousins will call each other with any new information they have uncovered, to share excitement and bounce ideas off of one another. Yet Bernita’s open curiosity for having an ancestor at Mount Vernon is coupled by Donald’s cynicism. Despite his passion for unearthing everything he can about his ancestry, Mount Vernon represents frustrating histories that are glossed over in the grand narrative of George Washington and the founding of America.

A lot of publications make it seem like Mount Vernon was a great, ideal place. But I think anytime you are denied your freedom, it wasn’t all roses. And that’s the side of the story that I don’t think a lot of people realize. They talk about the struggle that George Washington had with slavery, but how many slaves were actually set free? So I think a lot of the times that history is glossed over.

Additionally, Donald takes great issue with the absence of the word ‘plantation’ in Mount Vernon’s official name. This, he claims, veils the realities of slave life that undoubtedly tied Mount Vernon to other large Virginian plantations of the time period. Donald grapples with the confusing contradiction that the father of our country, the man who helped shape and define basic, “universal” human rights simultaneously actively deprived hundreds of people this same respect. The contradiction became even more apparent for Donald when he learned that George Washington had rotated enslaved people in and out of Philadelphia to avoid a Pennsylvanian law called ‘An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery (1780),’ which stated that after six months an enslaved person was automatically free.

When he went to Philadelphia, the rules were that if you were in the state of Pennsylvania for a period of time, you would become free. He would rotate slaves back to Virginia so that the rule wouldn’t be applied to them. And so, that part of history isn't emphasized enough. I think if you look at your research and you look into the writings by other people, then you see these other things went on. The father of the country, the declaration

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20 One such phone call revolved around the idea of West Ford possibly being the son of George Washington, which I will show in chapter three.

21 See: ushistory.org/presidents house, and ‘Slaves at the President’s House’ article by Annette John-Hall
of independence, Thomas Jefferson and the founders say, "One nation under god," they say, "all men are created equal." Yet, we really know that those statements only apply to people who were White. They considered slaves inhuman. The constitution did not apply to them.

Donald has not visited Mount Vernon and has no immediate plans to do so. While he is not against the idea of visiting the plantation on which his ancestor was enslaved, Mount Vernon still embodies many confusing contradictions for him. One of the most pressing is that George Washington, an American symbol of freedom deprived his ancestor of that basic right. Therefore, at this time Donald is content in exploring other family stories that lead him to different ancestral spaces than the famous Mount Vernon.

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Family oral histories can be forgotten through the generations. They are like heirlooms tucked in a grandmother’s attic, never passed on to her grandson. Many memories that seem unimportant or painful become lost in time. Yet, a meticulous and determined grandson can search outside of his grandmother’s attic. He might turn to written documents to reclaim some of these lost stories. Such is the case with the descendants I have introduced in this chapter.

All seven share a desire to reconstruct family narratives, and do so by digging through written documents. For example, when Zunny’s family refused to share their secrets, she searched through public archives. Differently, Steve uses records of past generations in order to discover living family. Gloria and Rohulamin, on the other hand have an extensively researched family history. They use their knowledge to foster a relationship with Mount Vernon. A part of the same vast family tree, Loretta chooses a more internal approach, reflecting on the spiritual journey historical information offers her. Lastly, Bernita and Don rummage through records in order to revive the oral histories their grandmother never told them.
Thus, while these descendants have different reasons for reclaiming their family histories through written documentation, all are in search of stories that Mount Vernon doesn't tell. These are the alternate narratives of slavery at Mount Vernon. Thus, the stories they have shared with us make up the heart of this project.
Chapter Three: A Living Heirloom Threatening “American History”

“My grandmother used to tell us about our ancestor West Ford all the time. She said that West Ford was George Washington’s son. He had red hair and had a fair complexion, just like George Washington. And George Washington took him everywhere in the wagon with him when he was here at Mount Vernon. But the records show differently.”
- Judith Saunders-Burton

Oral histories help construct and reinforce family identities. Elders often share memories with younger generations of what happened in generations passed. Tales of family events before a person was born help define and shape one’s understanding of who they are in the present. Oral histories are alive because they change slightly each time they are remembered or told, and interpreted differently from person to person. Stories that a grandfather tells his granddaughter of his youth are alive in his memory. For instance, a grandfather won’t ever tell or remember his past the exact same way twice, and his granddaughter will remember or tell it differently than how it was told to her.

This tradition of collecting and imparting information about the family onto the next generation is related to the ‘living histories,’ that Perks and Thomson (2006) introduce. They describe oral histories as “living histories,” pieces of the past instilled in the memories of eyewitness participants. Yet, some narrators, like people descended from enslaved people at Mount Vernon, cannot tell first person accounts of that family history. Thus, I argue that oral histories can surpass the life of the eyewitness when they are inherited by the next generation.

22 Transcribed interview one with Judith at her home on July 8th, 2010. Lasted one hour.
Much like a treasured object is passed down from parent to child, oral traditions can take on the role of family heirloom. Thus, I term oral traditions with generational components *living heirlooms*.

While living heirlooms often carry a lot of weight within the family, it is a rare occasion when a family story challenges the very foundation of a national heritage. One such heirloom, as claimed by the Ford family, presents a very different version of American history and the father of our country. The patriarch of the Ford family, West Ford, was an enslaved man of mixed ancestry. West, the Ford family claims, told his children a secret too dangerous to share with anyone outside the family. Yet, it was a secret significant enough to be passed down the Ford family tree for two hundred years. By the turn of the 21st century, the Ford descendants decided to share their living heirloom with the rest of America. What happened next between the family and staff at Mount Vernon is best known today as the West Ford debate.

This debate orbited around an exposed secret, one that the Ford family cherished and Mount Vernon rejected. The narrative of George Washington having a son by an enslaved woman was highly uncomfortable for Mount Vernon and many observers of the debate. While we can only hypothesize why this was the case, I propose that West Ford ripped the veil draped over a larger American secret. As Taussig (1999) proposes, a public secret is something generally known, but difficult to articulate. This secret is that many enslaved women had children with white men, most often against their will. As the possible illegitimate son of George Washington, West Ford epitomizes an uncomfortable and nasty national secret. Additionally, as Allessandro Portelli (1991) writes, the uncertainty of the tale adds to its symbolic value. Thus, West Ford’s birth, like other uncomfortable truths, “is not important because it happened, but because of how it has shaped a cluster of tales, legends, symbols and imagery” (1). Thus, as we
shall see as the debate below unfolds, West Ford the person and West Ford the modern symbol are two different concepts altogether.

In analyzing the West Ford debate, I do not wish to “prove” whether or not George Washington fathered West Ford. My role is not to pick a side, but to analyze the political and social dynamics that influenced the debate itself, and how they perpetuate existent racial dynamics in Virginian and American society. I am interested in how Mount Vernon and the West Ford descendants have come to believe what they do, not in who gives the most convincing case. However, my position in this debate is far from neutral, as I firmly believe the Ford family’s alternate narrative has as much right to be heard as Mount Vernon’s dominant narrative. Thus, my position in this debate is reflected in the way I have constructed this chapter. I place the alternate narrative and the dominant narrative side-by-side in these pages because I believe that is where they belong.

**The West Ford Debate**

The issue of conflicting historical narratives at Mount Vernon is best represented by the case of West Ford. Ford was a man of both African and European ancestry born to an enslaved woman named Venus, and “owned” by John Augustine Washington, George Washington’s brother. Ford’s descendants describe him as very fair-skinned with red hair and blue-grey eyes. Because he was taught to read and write, mentioned in two Washington wills, and freed at the age of twenty-one, most historians would agree that he was blatantly favored by the Washington family.  

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23 First, Hannah, John Augustine’s wife, instructed he be vaccinated for small pox as well as “bound up to a good tradesmen,” or taught a trade in which he would be able to make a decent living. Additionally, her son Bushrod Washington freed Ford in his will.
As a result, West Ford had the means to become a community leader. He founded a town named Gum Springs on land given to him by Bushrod Washington, John Augustine’s son. Gum Springs was populated by freed African Americans, many of whom had previously been enslaved at Mount Vernon. When a white neighbor started using land that belonged to Gum Springs, Ford took him to court and won the case, which was a significant achievement for a formerly enslaved Black man in the early 19th century. Additionally, The MVLA had great respect for Ford, as they asked him to advise them on how to reconstruct Mount Vernon to look as it did during George Washington’s time. Since Washington’s death, Mount Vernon had fallen into disrepair until the organization was formed and bought Mount Vernon in 1859. Additionally, when Ford was near death in 1863, the MVLA brought him from Gum Springs to spend his final days at Mount Vernon, where he was later buried.

When comparing his privileged life to that of other enslaved people working for the Washington family, it is clear there was something about Ford that made him stand out. Was it because he was also a Washington? Mount Vernon historian Mary Thompson doesn’t deny that this is a likely possibility. His preferential treatment and physical characteristics strongly suggest that he belongs on the Washington family tree. However, there is still one pressing issue that propels both the modern MVLA, and descendants of West Ford into passionate opposition. Specifically, was West Ford the son of George Washington?

The highly charged debate, at its height at the turn of the 21st century, still exists at a murmur today. It is unresolved, in the sense that both sides refuse to give up their beliefs. As a result, I argue that the West Ford debate is not really about West Ford the person. Rather, it is about West Ford as a symbol that is telling of the racial, social and political dynamics that shape how history is taught.

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21 I will go more into Mary’s point of view later on in this chapter.
Ford Descendant Perspectives

Dr. Judith Saunders-Burton, a direct descendant of West Ford, believes her ancestor is the son of George Washington. On a hot July day in Washington D.C., Judith, a woman who has lived in Virginia most of her long life, welcomed me into her home. Her casual dress, grey hair and glasses made her seem approachable, yet she was clearly tense and defensive about the subject of West Ford. It was obvious that she had met some harsh resistance to her beliefs in the past. As soon as we sat down in her sunroom, Judith started slowly and carefully sifting through articles on West Ford, which she kept in a manila folder. It had been years since she had given a lecture on her ancestor, and she wished to refresh her mind. When she finally looked up, she began her passionate and well-researched account of why West Ford was George Washington’s son.

Her carefully crafted sentences and piercing eyes were a testament to how important West Ford was to her. In the beginning, she spoke as if I opposed her beliefs and she was intent on proving me wrong. She told of how her family had carried this secret for hundreds of years. However, Mount Vernon and other history authorities reject her family story. West Ford’s paternity was important to her, as it is a large part of her family’s identity.

Judith grew up learning of her heritage through oral narratives. Her grandmother told her about an enslaved woman of mixed ancestry named Venus, who worked for John Augustine Washington, and became West Ford’s mother. As Judith grew older, her grandmother’s stories about Venus and West Ford inspired her to write her educational studies dissertation on Gum Springs. Judith also published several newspaper articles on West Ford. One such article published in the late 1990s, earned her a phone call from a distant relative she hadn’t known
about, Linda Allen Bryant. Linda shared the same oral history, about Venus and West Ford. Linda’s mother told her how Venus was commanded to sleep in George Washington’s bed during his winter visits to his brother’s home. As a result of these nights, West Ford was born. The Bryant family shared the same stories about West Ford riding in George Washington’s carriage, going to church with him, and learning to read and write with other Washington children. After over a century of separation, two branches of the Ford family tree had the same story to tell, as if it was encoded in their shared DNA.

Shortly after discovering they shared oral and genetic heritage, the Burton and Allen families decided to contact Mount Vernon with questions in 1996. However, the cousins were dissatisfied with the amount of information the MVLA had to offer. Judith explained that when she visited the MVLA library to do research, she was denied access to George Washington’s diary written in 1784, the year West Ford was born. Additionally, in her dissertation published in 1986, oral interviews with two different Gum Springs residents who used to work for Mount Vernon discuss having come across a journal entry in the library archives listing the names of several children fathered by George Washington. Yet, Judith writes, when another member of the staff discovered them looking at the journal, it was confiscated and never seen again. Both of these examples make Judith believe the MVLA has information about West Ford they refuse to share. This leaves her suspicious of what else is locked away in the archives.

We believe that they had notes and papers that West Ford had written because he could read and write. And they never shared that. Also we believe that they know where West Ford is buried, and they claim they don’t. See, and we just cannot accept that.

After struggling with Mount Vernon for four years, the cousins took a more aggressive approach. What followed in late 1999 and early 2000 may be best described as the height of the

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25 Both people that were interviewed state they don’t remember if West Ford was on the list.
26 From interview one with Judith.
publicized West Ford paternity debate. From Judith’s perspective, the MVLA did not acknowledge or respect her heritage claim. Instead, she argues they claimed written records proved George Washington did not father West Ford.

They keep repeating the same things over and over. For instance, they say that George Washington could not father any children because he had small pox. Well, we disagree with that… because we found a book that said Martha Washington had a very bad case of measles when she first married George Washington. And, even though she had children before, it made her sterile…so she was the one hindering them from having children.

To Judith, Mount Vernon’s counterarguments are aimed at actively denying her truth. Her frustration with this situation was quite palpable during our interviews.

Mount Vernon’s written response published during the height of this publicized debate offers other reasons why West Ford was probably not Washington’s son. First, they claim the winter West Ford was conceived was too harsh for Washington to visit his brother’s farm where Venus lived. Rather, they argue, it was much more likely that John Augustine Washington, or one of his teenage sons, Bushrod or Corbin fathered Ford. Mary Thompson, the head historian on slave life at Mount Vernon mentioned in our interview that Corbin’s middle name was George, which could explain why the Ford descendants believe George Washington fathered West. Additionally, Mount Vernon’s written response argues that George Washington was an extremely moral man, who thought carefully about how he acted in his personal life.

Historian Paul K. Longmore (1988) attests to Washington’s great concern with his public image. This, he argues, was a product of the Anglo-Virginian culture of the time and Washington’s desire for attention and praise. Washington, he argues, was actively involved in creating his public image. What made a man “great” in Washington’s time was to publically embody the “highest ideals” such as humbleness and bravery. In this way, Washington the man became a myth by performing his public self. Thus, using Longmore’s argument, it appears that
having a child with an enslaved woman was not inline with Washington’s goal of preserving his public image.

In the following quote, Mount Vernon “slave life” historian Mary Thompson describes her personal attempts to determine if the Ford family’s claims were valid.

You have people saying, "Well George Washington wouldn't have done something like that." You know? "Case closed." And I did look into it from a slightly different direction. I thought maybe the way to start investigating it was to try to prove that it did happen instead of just saying, "no." So I did that, and still came to the conclusion that I don’t think it happened. But we've looked at everything from George Washington's whereabouts to...I mean we have seriously investigated this. And we've asked historians from outside Mount Vernon to look at the evidence too, incase we were wearing blinders, without meaning too. And they came to the same conclusion that there just isn’t evidence. Other than the family story, there isn’t evidence for it and the likelihood is just...its improbable.27

Additionally, journal entries during that winter do not mention a trip to his brother’s farm, further building a case that there “just isn’t evidence.”

Mount Vernon’s calculated response published online in 2000 implies that because Ford’s link to Washington cannot be definitively proved through historical accounts it can be brushed off as untrue. The following is part of a response Mount Vernon crafted during this publicized debate.

After conducting extensive research on this subject the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association has found no documentation to corroborate the family's oral tradition. Although we respect the West Ford family's beliefs we need to look at all available information, both oral and written. 28

Thus, they argue, the oral history that the Ford family has to offer does not carry the same credibility as the accounts written by white males of Washington’s time.

Judith and her cousins argue that Mount Vernon’s version of history is not truthful or inclusive of the living heirloom they have kept for two centuries. To counteract this rejection, in

27 Transcribed interview one with Mary Thompson in her office on July 8th. Lasted one hour.
2000 Linda Allen Bryant created a website titled ‘The West Ford Legacy’ that told the Ford family story, as well as their frustrations with Mount Vernon.\(^2\) This website contains a culmination of resources supporting the Ford family history. This includes a Ford family tree founded by George Washington and Venus, West Ford’s biography as told by Bryant, and links to a PBS documentary, and other shows discussing West Ford from the Ford family perspective. The motto of the website, “stand tall, stand proud,” seems a direct response to the backlash the family has experienced from Mount Vernon and others who supported the dominant narrative of George Washington.

Additionally, Bryant published a book that uses fictional dialogue to illuminate her family’s oral history for the American public. This book, first published in May 2001 is titled, *I Cannot Tell a Lie: The True Story of George Washington’s African American Descendants*. In it, Bryant has the freedom to tell her truths about West Ford, Venus, and the Washington family in a creative light. *I Cannot Tell a Lie* portrays the Ford family’s narrative as the dominant narrative. In it, Bryant argues that her family’s story is unjustly deprived of its rightful place in American history books. She explains that the Fords have kept it a secret because they believed the public wasn’t ready to accept the truth until now.

Bryant’s book begins with the birth of West Ford, a fair-skinned child with red hair. His physical resemblance to the “Ol’ General,” was cause for much speculation amongst the slave community at John Augustine’s farm, as well as amongst Washington family members. John Augustine’s wife Hannah made no secret of her adoration of Ford, as she often requested to hold and look after him. In the book, Hannah summons Ford from bed as a toddler in order to introduce him to George Washington. In this scene, the “Ol’ General” doesn’t speak, yet the

\(^{2}\) See Bryant’s website: [http://www.westfordlegacy.com/home.htm](http://www.westfordlegacy.com/home.htm)
reader understands that when George Washington gives his famously small toothless smile, it means he accepts his son.

However, Bryant explains, “the Washington family was never going to admit West was a relative. Instead, they treated him like a privileged servant” (2001:80). According to Ford family oral history, the Washington family, including George Washington, blatantly favored Ford. Bryant writes that George would take his son to church, and Ford was taught to read and write with the other Washington children. Additionally, as is documented in the written record, Hannah and Bushrod Washington both gave Ford inheritance in their wills. Thus, while Ford’s rightful heritage was not recognized during his lifetime, Bryant argues that familial love and genetic ties were expressed in other ways.

I Cannot Tell a Lie chronicles how this oral history was passed down through generations of Ford descendants who lived through slavery, racial discrimination and the weight of such a powerful secret. In it, each generation learns about West Ford, falls in love, has children and passes down the living heirloom. Learning this oral history is a rite of passage, as mothers and fathers carefully decide when their children are ready for the responsibility of inheriting it. As each generation learns about West Ford, the experience is enlightening and often empowering, as it carries more weight than any piece of paper or genetic proof could in documenting the Ford family tree.

For many generations, the Ford family was stuck in the uncomfortable position of secretively safeguarding their living heirloom, while at the same time desperately wanting to share it with others. As sociologist Georg Simmel (1950) theorizes, the secret is an attractive treasure held in a position of tension until it is betrayed and the truth comes to light. For two centuries, the Ford family debated amongst themselves about when the American public would
be ready to hear the truth about their ancestor. In the late 1990s they decided it was time when
the Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings controversy exploded onto the national stage. Until
then, the Ford’s focused on preserving their living heirloom within the family.

In her book, Bryant describes how members of her lineage are given the responsibility of
“family chronicler,” as selected by the previous generation. These individuals embody the
chronicling capacity of written documentation. To explain this, Bryant quotes Sir Walter Scott
who says, “I cannot tell how the truth may be; I say the tale as ‘twas said to me” (2001:9). Bryant
writes that her mother selected her out of her ten siblings as family chronicler. At the end of the
book, her mother tells her to go public with their history, because the American people might be
ready to accept the truth about West Ford.

Finally, the book ends with the Allen family discovering that their distant relative, Judith,
shared the same oral history. In 1994, Bryant’s mother read an article in the National Enquirer by
Judith, titled Look Who’d Be on the Throne if Washington had been King. Bryant contacted
Judith, and they establish a relationship based around the shared wish to tell the American public
about West Ford. Their partnership began with a joint article published in the Rocky Mountain
News, George Washington in their family apple tree, black sisters say (Jackson, 2001). Then, the
team approached Mount Vernon with their story.

The body of the book does not address any backlash that the Ford family experienced
during the highly publicized debate. However, the foreword and afterward blatantly hammer in
the political motives behind publishing such a book. I Cannot Tell a Lie is a creative way to
share the Ford family living heirloom. Through this book, Bryant seeks validation, and to
successfully challenge the dominant version of George Washington’s life. As Bryant wrote in
the foreword,

30 I will discuss this later in this chapter.
The Ford family wants to claim its legacy and this novel serves as documentation of our heritage. The descendants of West Ford by no means wish to denigrate George Washington, but merely want the validation and vindication of who we are in American history for our children and our children’s children (2001: xiii).

In the book, there is no direct mention of the Ford family’s struggles with Mount Vernon. She ends her narrative directly before the debate erupted. However, the foreword and afterward seem to be speaking directly to Mount Vernon staff. One example is the sentence, “many historians wish to place the onus of West Ford’s birth on his nephews, Bushrod or Corbin Washington (xii).” This is addressing the counter suggestion Mary Thompson, the Mount Vernon historian on slave life had for West Ford’s paternity. As she explained in our interview,

> I think many of the family stories, they don’t work, the stories about West Ford being taught to read and write with the children in the family…stories about him going to church with George Washington. A number of the stories don’t work when you try to link them up to George Washington. They do work for the Bushfield Family, which is George Washington’s brother’s family which is where West Ford was born and where his mother lived, which is like nine miles from here. And several of us think Ford’s father is probably the youngest son (Corbin) but we don’t know.  

To this, Bryant replies, “We know of our heritage. There are no “Bushrods or Corbins” in the Ford family tree” (xiii).

Bryant’s afterward seems to counteract the creatively written and hopeful conclusion to her book. It reflects the frustrations the Ford family was dealing with, quite publicly, with Mount Vernon at the time this book was published. As Mary explained from her point of view, the experience was difficult for Mount Vernon and hurtful for the West Ford descendants.

We've had more difficult relationships with the West Ford descendants. I don’t know how they feel about it but my feelings were when I first got here that there was very much an adversarial relationship. And I think we've gotten to the point where we've agreed to disagree. But no one thinks anybody is out to hurt the other one. We disagree about the evidence. But that doesn’t mean we don’t think they are nice people and thoroughly enjoy having some of them here. I hope that the relationship is better from

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31 Mary Thompson interview one.
Hansen, 60

their side, or they feel it’s better than it was. Because I certainly feel its better and less
tense than it was. 32

As was clear in my interview with Judith, these tensions are very much alive amongst
Ford family members. While the debate has slipped out of the public eye, and thus relieved some
of the pressures from Mount Vernon staff, Judith is still very hurt by their disregard for her
family’s living heirloom. Linda Bryant articulates this mentality in the afterword when she writes,
“Western Eurocentric ideology has traditionally held a limiting concept when it comes to African
American history. Consequently, African American’s have no “relevant” history since their
stories have not been “documented” in history texts.”

Bryant argues that oral histories were the only way enslaved African Americans could
preserve their heritage. Because most did not know how to read or write, oral narration allowed
elders to transmit memories to younger generations. Oral narration was also a highly valued
mode of documentation in Western Africa, undoubtedly influencing how enslaved African
Americans would choose to remember their family pasts. The oral historian Alex Haley
describes his own breathtaking experience of being able to retrace a family story all the way back
to an ancestral home: The Gambia (Perks, Alistair, Thompson, 2006). His grandmother always
told him about Kintay, an ancestor who had been kidnapped from a small village in West Africa
by slavers when he went into the forest to chop wood. Through many serendipitous revelations,
Haley eventually met an elderly man of the Kinte clan in the Gambia who was in charge of
memorizing the village history. Tucked away in hours of oral recounting, this elder repeated the
exact story that Haley’s grandmother had taught him. This story speaks to the power of oral
histories in West African and African American families. Oral narration has immense value as a

32 Mary Thompson interview one.
chosen method of chronicling, not just as an alternative to written documentation. This is what Bryant is trying to argue when she explains her own family’s oral narrative.

However, as is true in most societies, history is told by the socially dominant. As Bryant states, “West Ford was a man stripped of his rightful heritage because of the color of his skin” (402). In other words, because the Ford family’s oral histories were not validated by written evidence, Mount Vernon, and most Americans do not acknowledge them as the “truth.” Today, the dominant narrative continues to assert that “the father of our country” was a childless man.

The Construction of Historical Truths about Mount Vernon

Historical truths are alive, in the sense that they are evolving, diverging or disappearing based on the beliefs or desires of those who carry them. As Hayden White insightfully describes the process of constructing a dominant narrative, “events are real not because they occurred but because they are capable of finding a place in a chronologically ordered sequence (1990:20).” Mount Vernon’s narrative of George Washington, that he was a childless man, reflects the morals they wish him to embody. On the other hand, the Ford family event, or the alleged paternity of West Ford has been preserved in the family for two centuries, flourishing in two different lineages that were separated for a century. These contradictory truths about George Washington and West Ford developed separately from each other for two centuries. One evolved and asserted itself as the dominant Anglo-American narrative, taught in classrooms, recorded in books and remembered on the Fourth of July. This narrative claims that while George Washington was a childless man, he became a father to all Americans.

Yet, the Ford narrative tells a very different version of George Washington. While he was an admirable leader, it argues, he also conceived a child with a teenage enslaved woman. The
title of the article about Bryant and Burton, Look Who’d Be on the Throne if Washington had been King says it all. If Washington had an African American son, that would mean the American public would need to acknowledge the central role that the Ford family, and by extension --African Americans have played in shaping the United States of America.

This mentality is closely tied with that of the Jefferson-Hemings controversy, a highly publicized debate fixed on whether or not Jefferson had a thirty-eight year romantic relationship with an enslaved woman named Sally Hemings. Hemings descendants claim that Jefferson fathered Sally’s six children. Four of her children survived to adulthood: Beverly, Harriet, Madison and Eston Hemings. Multiple accounts from journal entries of Jefferson’s friends describe this romantic relationship. Additionally, autobiographies of two African Americans, Madison Hemings and Israel Jefferson, stated that Thomas Jefferson fathered all six children (Gordon-Reed, 1997). For two centuries, this has been debated between historians, representatives of Monticello, and descendants of Sally Hemings. However, in 1998, DNA test comparisons of the Y-Chromosome of a male Jefferson descendant, with a male Eston Hemings descendant matched, proving a genetic link.

This DNA test, in addition to written documentation and a statistical comparison of the arrivals and departures of Jefferson males at Monticello with the births of Sally’s children suggests that there is a one percent chance that the father of Sally’s children was not Thomas Jefferson (Stanton, 2000). This has given Hemings descendants the freedom to come forward with their experiences as a Jefferson descendant. Recently, the most vocal descendant is a nineteen-year-old college student named Jacquiline Yurkoski who has been featured on the Monticello website as well as interviewed by Glamour Magazine for an article titled All the

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31 Israel Jefferson was a man enslaved at Monticello and close to the Hemings family.
In high school, one of my teachers said he doubted Jefferson fathered Hemings’ children. I laughed and said, ‘I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for that relationship.’ Our status has only recently been acknowledged by some historians, but my family has always known and celebrated it. I’m proud of my lineage.

As Yurkoski states, this topic is still a source of heated debate amongst historians, and the American public. The genetic and written evidence, both Eurocentric ways of learning the “truth,” is still contested because the results don’t support what some want to dismiss.

One such dissenter, William G. Hyland Jr., a lawyer from Virginia, published his highly charged book, *In Defense of Thomas Jefferson: The Sally Hemings Sex Scandal* in 2009 as if he were representing Jefferson in a court of law, and we the readers are the jury. Hyland seeks to redeem Jefferson’s reputation from the apparent libel of having had a sexual relationship with an enslaved woman. He reexamines the written and genetic evidence that “villanized” Jefferson, aggressively flipping everything over on its head and backing the skeptical reader into a corner with “either/or” condemnations. On page one he states, “Thomas Jefferson is either the most prolific, hypocritical liar in American history or the victim of the most profane, 200-year-old defamation of character allegation in legal annals” (2000).

While Hyland is not representative of all those who deny a Jefferson-Hemings affair, he does represent the point of view that supporters, such as Annette Gordon-Reed seek to counter. In *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (1997), she comments on the disrespect and blatant racism inherent in the controversy. Her goal in writing this book was not to prove whether the story is true or false, but as a “critique of the defense that has been mounted to counter the notion of a Jefferson-Hemings liaison” (xiv). As an African American, she
describes how historians’ revulsion towards the possibility has hurtful impact. She closes her book with the statement:

Most Jefferson scholars decided from the outset that this story was not true and that if they had anything to do with it, no one would come to think otherwise. In the most fundamental sense, the enterprise of defense has had little to do with expanding people’s knowledge of Thomas Jefferson…the goal has been quite the opposite: to restrict the knowledge as a way of controlling the allowable discourse on this subject (1997: 224).

In this regard, her motive is much like mine in portraying the West Ford debate. Like Gordon-Reed, I am not so much concerned with proving whether or not George Washington fathered Ford. Rather, I intend to document the political and social issues that contribute to how the past is told.

In 2012, fourteen years after the height of the Jefferson-Hemings controversy, Monticello has now incorporated the Sally Hemings family story into the narrative of Thomas Jefferson’s life. Specifically, Monticello’s official website chronicles the debate, stating that Jefferson likely “fathered one, if not all of Sally Hemings’s children.”

Ford descendants, however, remain silenced. Judith echoed Fine-Dare’s frustration with Eurocentric historians undervaluing cultural traditions in our interview. To her, oral histories should be considered on an equal playing field with written records.

See, other writers, they don’t know about the area, they don’t know about the descendants, they don’t get the oral history. So they can’t piece together certain things that we [slave descendant historians] would piece together. They don’t see it from our viewpoint.

Mount Vernon does not acknowledge the oral history that the Ford descendants have to offer as legitimate because it has not been validated by written records or DNA testing. In order to “legitimize” the claims of oral tradition as the Hemings descendants have done, the Ford descendants requested a George Washington DNA sample so that they can test for a genetic link.

34 http://explorer.monticello.org/
35 Judith interview one.
While Mount Vernon does have hair samples presumably belonging to George Washington, they denied the Ford family’s request. As Mary Thompson explains,

Our director has said that if there is ever a test that would conclusively show that a particular person was the father, that we would submit samples, which was a big step for him. He's told the [Ford] family that he's reluctant to do it until then because every time you do a test like that it destroys original evidence so its not there for something that they might want to test later. The other thing is that we're pretty sure that its gonna show there’s a Washington in the male line. And until we can say "it is" or "isn’t" George Washington...if it comes out that there is a male Washington, which we're pretty sure it will, people will jump all over it and say, "Washington was the father!" Like they did with Thomas Jefferson. We think there is a Washington back there but it’s not him.  

Since Mount Vernon was unwilling to offer DNA testing, the Ford descendants turned to a Washington relative who descends from an all male line to volunteer for DNA testing. However, the anonymous relative refused to be tested for this purpose. Thus, refusal on both Mount Vernon’s part and the Washington descendants has prevented the Ford descendants from attempting to “validate” their family history using scientific, Eurocentric avenues. Not only were their claims rejected as baseless by Mount Vernon and other George Washington historians, the family was denied a chance to “prove” their claims through DNA analysis.

The Ford descendants were quite disturbed by the backlash they received when they openly challenged the dominant narrative of George Washington in 2000-2001. They feel their oral history has been ignored and rejected by Mount Vernon. As a result, the American public is denied a larger truth. This brings up the question: why are the Ford descendants so eager to validate their ties with George Washington? Ford’s birth epitomizes a very painful truth: that many white men raped enslaved women. Ford was born in 1784 or 1785, when Venus was about sixteen and George Washington was about fifty-two. Although “proving” to the American public that Washington fathered Ford would tie them to the first president in American history books, it

36 Mary Thompson interview one.
37 Since the Y chromosome is passed from father to son, his DNA may be compared to a West Ford descendant from an all male line.
would also throw an ugly truth about Washington and their family origins into the national spotlight. While I won’t try to dissect their motives any further, it is important to also question why the Ford descendants wish to “stand tall, stand proud” with their version of Ford’s conception.

No matter the reasons, Judith wishes for her oral history to be validated on a national level. During our interview, her descriptions of the MVLA were charged, attesting to her anger and hurt that the debate had not turned out the way she wanted. The emotional scars caused by losing a very public debate about something so personal are still visible. However, it became clear during our interview, and in reading Linda Bryant’s book, that the debate is not over. Their public declaration has been reduced to a murmur, yet it continues to shape how Ford descendants relate to one another and define themselves as a family. It is as if West Ford’s story is as much a part of creating and establishing the Ford family, as is their shared DNA.

“Do you know about West Ford?”—Descendant Perspectives

Remnants of the West Ford debate have rippled into the lives of onlookers. The controversy remains a source of speculation and debate passed along through rumors, the blogosphere, and personal memories. Often, those who were not directly involved with the debate have something to say about it, as I learned during interviews with four different descendants for this project. Three of the four brought up West Ford without prompt, testifying to the impact the debate has had on the American public, particularly among descendants of enslaved people at Mount Vernon. I include them here to reinforce the idea that the “truth” about West Ford is plural and fractured. A complicated historical question like this cannot be told
linearly, as it does not reflect the fractured nature of the debate. Yet, the questions remain: who was this man, who was his father, and what does he symbolize in American history?

The four people that I am calling onlookers of the West Ford debate are descendants of people enslaved at Mount Vernon. However, their opinions differ depending on which side of the debate they feel more connected too. As it has turned out, the first descendant, Raymond, sides strongly with the Ford family and the second, Bonnie presented herself as impartial yet leaning toward the Ford side. The last two, balanced out the first two, as Steve was impartial yet leaning toward Mount Vernon, and Rohulamin was in full support of Mount Vernon. Through these four perspectives, we can see that “the truth” depends on who you are, who you come from, and the places you are associated with.

In late July of 2011, Raymond welcomed me into his two-room exhibit dedicated to the history of Gum Springs. We sat amongst hanging pictures of large families and relics speaking to his hometown’s fascinating past. Raymond, a middle aged historian who grew up in Gum Springs, spoke with authority on the history of West Ford, while at the same time making clear his distrust of Mount Vernon. In the interview, he sided with the West Ford descendants. To him, Mount Vernon is dishonest about West Ford, and thus still exists as a place of oppression for African Americans. In the following quote, he echoes many of Judith’s arguments about West Ford’s final resting place.

Supposedly he was buried in the original tomb at Mount Vernon…the original tomb was empty, and that’s where they placed him. So now with all this controversy, [West Ford descendants] wanting the DNA testing and all of that, supposedly, they’re saying now, "oh no he was never buried there." Because at one point, they were saying "oh we don’t know where he’s buried." Now they're saying, "he’s buried with all the other slaves in an unmarked grave." Now, what sense does that make? Supposedly now, you thought so much of this guy, that when he was sickly and on his death bed, you went and got him,

38 Raymond’s name is changed in this project.
rode him back to Mount Vernon to take care of him! He dies, and you're gonna bury him in an unmarked grave?! [R laughs] What sense does that make?!  

To Raymond, the MVLA has secrets it is not willing to share. Withholding knowledge is another way to oppress the alternate narrative that the West Ford descendants offer. But this issue does not just apply to West Ford. Raymond believes Mount Vernon is not doing nearly enough to represent the history of slave life at Mount Vernon. These histories, as he says, are “disappearing.”

On a website dedicated to his museum, Raymond wrote in 2010,

In light of the recent revelations about Thomas Jefferson, much has been written lately about the probability that George Washington also fathered children by slave women. The local Washington Area press seems to support the MVLA’s contention that this premise is false. But, they are vehemently opposed to conducting DNA tests. Why? It is common knowledge that slave owners used female slaves for sexual pleasure. Are we supposed to believe that George Washington didn’t? It is also probable that many slave owners, as did Thomas Jefferson, fell in love with their slave mistresses. Was West Ford truly Washington’s son? Isn’t it about time for the truth to be told?  

Since Raymond clearly favors the Ford descendants in the West Ford debate, he would not be able to reconcile with Rohulamin, a descendant of several slaves from Mount Vernon. I interviewed Rohulamin in the living room of his home, surrounded by his wife’s beautiful paintings of a personal trip to Italy, documents helping to organize a reunion of his fraternity at Howard University, and a love seat originally belonging to the Arlington House. Rohulamin, a retired administrative judge for Washington DC, carried himself with authority, claiming the interview as his from the very beginning. Thus, when he introduced the West Ford debate into his lecture, it was apparently only concerned with whether or not Ford was the son of Bushrod Washington.

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39 Transcribed interview with Raymond at his museum on July 14th, 2010. Lasted forty-five minutes. All subsequent quotes are from this interview.

40 The “recent controversy about Thomas Jefferson,” which Raymond refers to below is the Jefferson-Hemings debate.
Bushrod Washington, George Washington's nephew, he is the putative father of West Ford...And even though some people may say, "well, there’s no evidence to prove that Bushrod was West Ford's father, "many of the historians at Mount Vernon have said, "well we will concede that if Bushrod was not the father then some of the other Washingtons probably were."

He does not mention George Washington as part of the West Ford debate, implying that the notion was insignificant.

Rohulamin, as a member of the extended Quander family, has a stronger allegiance with Mount Vernon than with the West Ford descendants. As a result, Rohulamin’s perspective seems to favor Mount Vernon, as he believes West Ford may be the descendant of a Washington, just not George Washington. However, Rohulamin’s perspective differs from two other descendants of enslaved people who don’t share his privileged relationship with Mount Vernon.

Steve and Bonita are free of personal connections to either the West Ford descendants or Mount Vernon, and are therefore more open to the fluidity of possibilities. I sat down with Bonita on a cool summer evening at a coffee shop in old Alexandria. Immediately, I was struck by her presence, a grandmother so passionate about her family history. Amidst stories of her own family history Bonita started to tell of how she first heard about West Ford. While attending a lecture at a museum exhibit on slavery, she sat down in front of a couple of African American women who were giggling loudly. Below, she recounts how this was the first she heard of the name ‘West Ford.’

“When I was talking to my cousin Donald, I said, “Donald...do you know West Ford?...There were some ladies whispering...then they started talking about West Ford and they started giggling and laughing.” I said, “These people are my age!” When I turned around, they said, “oh you don’t know about him?” And I said, “no.” And they said, “oh well you probably could read about him.” That’s what they told me. I found a picture of him in a map directory of African American churches, homes and schools from 1700-1860. And sure enough when I opened it up there was West Ford! I said, “Oh my goodness, this man looks like George Washington!””...So Donald said, “wait a minute, I’ll tell you who it is.” So he went on his computer and he said, “West Ford could
possibly be the son of George Washington.” I said, “get out of here…well you know what Donald, looking at this picture…that's who he looks just like, George Washington.”

Bonita was willing to consider the possibility that George Washington fathered West Ford. This, I attribute to her lack of personal ties to either the West Ford descendants or Mount Vernon. She was very receptive to the visual and oral clues about Ford’s paternity, placing a high value on modes of truth telling other than written documents. Bonita was willing to entertain a narrative about West Ford that wasn’t “proven” in a Eurocentric sense. Thus, to me it seemed her attitude implied she was in favor of the possibility—it intrigued her.

Steve on the other hand seemed to lean more toward Mount Vernon in the West Ford debate. While he was also very open to the possibility, his value of written documentation seemed to influence whose argument he might find more believable. As a member of the prominent African American Syphax family, Steve was familiar with the notion of white men having children with enslaved women. Therefore, I prompted him for his opinion of the debate, as I was quite confused by the heated oppositions I had encountered in my interviews with Mary and Judith. I asked him what he thought during dinner at his house in the outskirts of Washington D.C. While eating ice cream on his covered porch during a thunderstorm, Steve articulated his idea as follows,

One of the first things I did when we moved here in ’90, is I went to the Fairfax County Library, and I found a book about presidents and I saw the entry about George Washington that said 'he didn’t have any children.' …it went on to talk about his adopted children, but it set in motion a series of questions I had about, 'so you know, what are these stories that he had kids, and you know the other things like that?' And, I guess it’s really difficult to say. You know, I mean who’s to say that the lore isn’t the right thing? But you know, as things go down through the course of generations, it tends to get watered down, and it tends to kinda get a little more sensational, and who wouldn’t want to be the descendant of the first president of the United States, the father of our country? So I try to keep it in context.  

41 Mariah Syphax  
42 Steve interview two.
Steve went on to coach me on how to best portray the West Ford debate in my work. In order to keep the oral stories in context, he argued, I should match them up with written documentation. If the stories and data worked together, then the information could be validated. As a family historian who based most of his research on written documentation, Steve seemed to lean more toward the camp that values written over oral documents. However, as he did not have personal ties to either the West Ford descendants or Mount Vernon, he was very open to the possibilities. Steve suggested that I triangulate the data in an objective manner. Thus, he might agree with Vivienne Szekeres (2011) when she says, “the words we use shape the stories we tell and reflect much about the story tellers” (44). While written documents can be the frozen remnants of one person’s opinion, many people shape an oral narrative. Thus, the “danger” seems to be their fluid tendencies, the ability for words and meanings to change over time and space. Thus, when Steve says, “who’s to say the lore isn’t the right thing?” he also implies that it could just as well be “the wrong thing.”

As we can see through the eyes of these four people, the “truth” about West Ford is fractured. There is a discontinuity to the narrative of West Ford’s paternity, reminiscent of the themes Michael Foucault (1980) puts forth in his interview *Truth and Power*. He states,

> It seems to me that in certain empirical forms of knowledge…the rhythm of transformation doesn't follow the smooth continuist schemas of development which are normally accepted (1980:111-112).

The dominant, linear version of George Washington and West Ford, supported by written documents, becomes muddled in the presence of the Ford family living heirloom. Therefore, I argue that there is no single history that can encompass the story of West Ford, and the people whose lives are tangled up in his mysterious legacy. Yet, at this moment in time there can only
be one dominant truth. This truth states that George Washington is only a symbolic parent, the father of the United States of America.
Chapter Four: Unearthed Secrets of the Burial Ground

Far back in the woods of Mount Vernon, a lone stone monument marks the site where George Washington buried his slaves. It is a modest memorial, apparently too unimportant to be roped off or otherwise distinguished from the other parts of the property. It seems not to matter that the hands of these men and women built the celebrated mansion that was Washington's home. It seems not to matter that these men and women provided the free labor on which the plantation operated. This absence of proper recognition is an atrocity that adds insult to the already deep moral injury of slavery.


These are the words that spurred a new era at Mount Vernon. The article, published in the Washington Post on February 26, 1982 was the first rupture in a dam separating the pools of ideas between Mount Vernon staff and descendants of people who were enslaved at Mount Vernon. The journalist, Dorothy Gilliam, angered by her observations from a recent visit to the burial ground wrote an article titled ‘Remembrance’ that sent shock waves through Mount Vernon. In the article, she demands that Mount Vernon pay more respect to the burial ground. To enforce her point, she likens its neglect to the racial inequalities resonating from the institution of slavery itself. Gilliam’s powerful words spurred the action she desired. Mount Vernon was very quickly contacted by a group of politicians, a fledgling organization titled Black Women United for Action (BWUFA), and one descendant, Judith Saunders-Burton. Together, they demanded that the MVLA do a better job of preserving the burial ground by building a fence, cleaning up trash and weeding the grounds. But most importantly, the group demanded that a monument be built to honor the people who were enslaved at Mount Vernon.

Judith was a key player in the events leading up to September 21st. What further empowered her involvement was that. written records claim that Judith’s enslaved ancestor was
buried at the slave burial ground. Judith was asked to join Fairfax County lawyer Frank Mathews and Fairfax county supervisor James Scott who after reading ‘Remembrance’ decided to take action. While Judith was a passionate beacon for the restoration for the burial ground as a sign of respect, the MVLA was only truly spurred into action by the legal cards Mathews and Scott had to play. As Gilliam articulates in a follow-up article titled ‘Memorial,’ Mount Vernon was at the time scheduled to come before the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors to renew its tax-exempt status for two of its restaurants. Scott informed Mathews of Gilliam’s article and suggested that they threaten to withhold Mount Vernon’s tax-exempt status unless they agreed to restore the burial ground. According to Judith and Gilliam, without the lawyers’ trump card, the memorial would likely not have been built. As Judith explains,

First of all, the burial ground had grown up in brambles and bushes…and we went to Mount Vernon, we had a meeting and talked with the director about it…Mathews said that if they did not comply, that they would lose their tax-exempt status. And that was what gave them the push to go ahead...That was quite a task to get the Mount Vernon Ladies to agree to that. …But now they act as if it was their idea, and it wasn’t. They had to have fire to their feet to get them to do that. But thank god they did it and it’s a beautiful thing.

While Judith and the lawyers campaigned hard for the burial ground’s restoration, Mary Thompson observed the MVLA’s side of events. Mary was a new employee during the height of the Washington Post scandal in 1983. In her small basement office of the MVLA administrative building, amongst large stacks of papers and books, Mary described the tense events that led to the creation of a new marker at the burial ground.

It wasn’t until Gilliam’s article came out in the Washington Post saying, “this site is here, it’s not being interpreted, people aren’t encouraged to go there.” It took her article to push Mount Vernon into doing what they should have been doing before…There were

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43 As discussed in the previous chapter, Judith doesn’t believe he was buried in the burial ground, but rather in the original tomb with the Washington family, and then later removed to another location when George Washington’s body was transferred to the current tomb. However, Mount Vernon staff disagree with her claims.

44 Judith interview one.
the people who were working with the local citizen’s group, or the regent and the
director…and the archivist…and all three of them chain-smoked, and they’d come out of
those meetings and just [M mimics loud cigarette inhaling] and be very anxious…I think
they were annoyed that this had come up.45

While Mary was not invited to the meetings, she still remembers the extreme tension and
embarrassment floating through the air at Mount Vernon as the directors dealt with the backlash
of Gilliam’s article. Even before the article, Mary was very familiar with the issues that Mount
Vernon had with talking about slavery. In her first few years of working at Mount Vernon in the
early 1980s, slavery wasn’t a topic the tourist attraction was willing to discuss. Starting out as a
tour guide, Mary was quite surprised to learn three years into her career that the burial ground
existed. Below, Mary describes her experience with this issue while working at Mount Vernon in
the early 1980s.

I first came here in 1980 and…staff didn’t mention slaves…they called them
servants…we were not encouraged to talk about slavery. I was here for three years and
didn’t know that there was a slave burial ground here…and I had started as an interpreter
so I was out on the grounds giving tours and stuff! 46

Exposing the darker underbelly of the “father of our country,” was something Mount
Vernon was very hesitant to do. Despite the fact that the burial ground was marked and had a
trail leading to the site, tourists and staff were not encouraged to go there. There was no sign
pointing the way, and the small dirt trail was most often overlooked. Until 1983, only the most
observant visitors of Mount Vernon would be able to distinguish the burial ground from other
parts of the forest. As a result, most visitors of ‘George Washington’s Mount Vernon’ would
leave with very little understanding of the people who made the plantation thrive.

Mary’s experience coincides with the way slavery is presented in the second version of
Mount Vernon: A Handbook published in 1985. The guidebook only uses the word “slave” in

45 Mary Thompson interview one.
46 Mary Thompson interview one
association with a discussion of farming. In it, wording becomes a tool steering the reader past any in depth discussion of slavery. While the MVLA handbook admits that slaves were present at Mount Vernon, it does not openly acknowledge that George Washington owned people. For example, the word is not used in direct association with George Washington, his family, or the main house where they lived. To avoid the word ‘slave,’ the writers used passive voice and glaring omissions of information about exactly who worked for the Washington family. For example, when discussing how renovations to the main house were completed, the Mount Vernon handbook states, “the master himself supervised the work” (22). The ambiguity of this sentence allows for Mount Vernon to avoid putting “Washington” and “slaves” in the same sentence.

While the second edition of *Mount Vernon: A Handbook* has blatant and purposeful gaps in its discussion of slavery, the earlier 1974 version omits the word ‘slave’ altogether. Any mention of the hundreds of enslaved people who made Mount Vernon function refers to them as ‘servants,’ or even more vaguely as ‘people.’ One descendant, Rohulamin Quander, discusses how this disregard for the truth of slavery became more and more unacceptable in the mid 1980s when the second edition was published. Below, he talks about how the enslaved descendant community and the American public demanded that Mount Vernon stop using the term “colored servants” as a euphemism for what these people really were.

A major reason, I’m not saying the only reason, why they took the signs down at Mount Vernon referring to us as ‘servants’ is because the Black folk who went there started writing letters and other people were writing letters saying, “stop it. Call it what it was. They were not servants. That’s your term to hide what these people were. They were slaves and let’s acknowledge that.” So they changed the word and made it “slaves.”

Thus, the early to mid 1980s were an incredibly heated time concerning the topic of slavery. The burial ground monument embodied the height of these tensions due to its high
publicity. The construction of a burial ground monument acted as a glaring siren beckoning visitors to recognize a very ugly part of Mount Vernon’s history, and George Washington’s life. Yet, ignoring this past was no longer acceptable. The MVLA eventually agreed to comply with the demands made of them. While Mount Vernon promptly tidied the burial ground, they left the biggest task of all to a design committee Judith was asked to join.

Steps toward building a monument at the burial ground began in early 1983. Judith and her fellow committee members contacted Howard University and asked architecture undergraduate students to undergo a design competition for the memorial. Howard University, the first African American college, added a special layer of meaning to the monument itself. To have the memorial honoring the enslaved people of Mount Vernon designed by African American college students was a powerful message of perseverance, progress and hope.

During our interview, Judith asked me to go to the top level of her mahogany bookshelf and take down a model replica of the memorial currently standing in the burial ground. As I walked back to our chairs, she explained that it was given to her as a thank you for guiding the design competition and the construction of the monument. As I held the bulky model on my lap, she described how the winning design was chosen for its simplicity. Three brick circles stacked on top of each other act as steps leading to a large stone plaque. Each step bears a different word: faith, hope and love, referencing bible verse 1 Corinthians 13:13. They lead to a cylinder granite block. Gazing down at the replica, I remembered being struck by the power of the actual monument when I visited Mount Vernon just days before. One simple, elegant sentence respectfully reflects a painful legacy. “In the memory of the Afro Americans who served as slaves at Mount Vernon this monument marking their burial ground.”
The final step in the process was a memorial dedication ceremony that took place on a drizzly grey morning of September 21st, 1983. This ceremony was a significant stepping-stone towards telling a more dynamic story of Mount Vernon and its famous owner. The dam preventing communication between descendants and Mount Vernon sprung a significant leak that day.

As visitors filed into the burial ground, Mary stood by the brick archway leading into the newly restored space, passing out brochures dictating the flow of events. Descendants like Judith, Loretta and Rohulamin no doubt walked past Mary, taking her brochures. Midway through this solemn affair, Judith stood up to read a provocative and moving poem titled ‘Here lie my ancestors,’ which begins with the words, “Here lie my ancestors. They were the ones that bore the brunt of plantation life, through misery, broken hearts and strife.” And as Gilliam recorded, Judith read the following.

Here lie my ancestors: Thank God Almighty this day has finally arrived!
Here lie my ancestors,” [Judith voice grows stronger and stronger]
A people raped of a country
A people raped of a homeland
A people raped of a tradition
A people raped of a heritage
A people raped of a culture!

On a very different note, the regent of the MVLA, Helen Sharp Anderson gave a speech arguing that George Washington was privately opposed to slavery after the Revolutionary War. This statement foreshadowed the main argument Mount Vernon would use in its discussions of slavery in the following decades.

It must have sounded strange to hear these two very different versions of slavery at Mount Vernon juxtaposed. Judith’s poem depicted the emotional devastation of social death and the long lasting scars of slavery. On the other hand, Helen’s argument was steeped in written
records, telling a euphemistic story of the first president’s hardships with the institution he participated in. One could wonder if they were even speaking about the same historical place, the same people or the same president. These clashing perspectives at the memorial dedication ceremony in 1983 would set the tone for decades to come. As the keynote speaker of the event, Dr. James Turner of Cornell University said that day, “George Washington and George Washington's slaves lived in different places and different times . . . on the same plantation.”

Centuries later, Mount Vernon staff and descendants would continue this separation by remembering different histories altogether.

Excavating Layers of Truth in the Burial Ground

On an icy December day in 2010, my peer Danait and I made our way to Mount Vernon, Virginia, having flown into Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport just an hour earlier. We were traveling with our Introduction to Archaeology professor, Andrew Overman to meet with Mount Vernon staff, an administrative coordinator, Daniel,47 and the head archaeologist, Esther, to ask that they put markers on the individual graves at this site. Once we arrived, Danait and I made our way behind the scenes of the visitor entrance to a small metal grey building housing the resident archaeology staff. Daniel welcomed us into his office where Professor Overman and Esther already sat. We promptly started explaining our purpose coming here.

Danait and I had worked on a final project together for our Introduction to Archaeology class. The project was to plan a hypothetical archaeological excavation and propose it to the class. We had picked the slave burial ground at Mount Vernon, and planned to excavate and identify the remains found in the burial ground for the final goal of reburying them with names and

47 Daniel’s name is changed, as I did not interview him for this paper, nor do I have permission to use his name.
markers. This, we argued, was possible because George Washington had meticulously recorded
the people enslaved on his estate. George Washington has several censuses of the enslaved
people on his five farms. Members of our class encouraged us to propose this to Mount Vernon,
as it seemed that there was a lot more that could be done to restore the burial ground.

Daniel’s answer was a quick and steadfast, “no.” According to him, Mount Vernon
already did everything it should for the burial ground. Our suggestions, he explained, were
invasive, costly and might be offensive to the families of people buried there. “What we do for
the burial ground is enough,” he assertively stated, explaining that an annual ceremony in the
burial ground was sufficient to commemorate the people buried there. As soon as his answer
was clear, Daniel seemed to soften, his shoulders relaxed and he leaned back into his office chair.
While icy wind rattled at the windows from outside, Daniel had just served us a different kind of
chill. Esther, who had been quiet thus far, pulled out a map of the burial ground taken with
ground-penetrating radar in the early 1990s. She explained that the map revealed at least forty
soil abnormalities that spanned out in a circular pattern, suggesting that this was indeed a burial
ground.

As she handed me the map, I could clearly see that there were several things that didn’t
match up with how the burial ground was presented to the public. First, the locations of possible
gravesites spilled far outside of the scope of the space designated for slave burial ground. As the
visitor walks toward the brick archway which represents the entrance to the burial ground, they
are unaware they have already walked past many gravesites. Secondly, there was at least one
anomaly found under the walkway leading to the memorial, stepped on by every visitor who

48 Ground-penetrating radar is a nondestructive geophysical method that essentially scans the ground
using radar pulses to map soil disturbances like burial sites.
chooses to visit the site. These discoveries, known by Mount Vernon staff for more than fifteen years, seemed like secrets intentionally buried from the public eye.

I handed the map back to Esther, and she offered to give us a private tour of Mount Vernon as a thank you for our visit. As we walked towards the burial ground, she pointed out several gravesites in a matter-of-fact tone. While repairing the archway a few years ago, she had discovered soil discolorations that would suggest it was a burial site. She had found another possible grave when Mount Vernon built a fence around the burial ground to prevent visitors from walking through the woods. Lastly, she had found two more discolorations when groundskeepers planted trees the summer of 2009. “See that bush over there?” she said, “that’s another burial.”

While I had spent the last couple of months reading about slavery at Mount Vernon, it did not prepare me for the disorienting emotions that came with knowing exactly where some of the burial sites were. It was confusing and upsetting to know that some of the burials were under trees, the archway and the well-trodden brick pathway. But much of this disorientation had to do with the power that an individual grave had in awakening personal feelings of sadness and guilt having to do with my country’s legacy of slavery, and my identity as a White American.

As disorienting as this was for me, Emmitt Smith’s (2010) episode of ‘Who Do You Think You Are,’ on NBC provided a different emotional reaction. This television show is designed to chronicle the journey of ancestral discovery. Smith, a football legend, traces his family’s long history of enslavement in America. Smith’s journey leads him to a plantation in Alabama, where he learns that his ancestor Prince Puryear was the son of a white slave trader Alexander Puryear, and an enslaved woman named Mariah. Emmitt walks to a small family cemetery and sees the names of Alexander and his wife etched in stone markers. After he
thoroughly searches the cemetery, he asks an accompanying genealogist where Prince and Mariah’s graves were. She smiles sadly and then points to the surrounding woods. Emmitt seems very shocked and upset, as he spends several minutes staring out into the woods. He later states he wishes he could have visited his ancestors’ graves.

Keeping Emmitt’s story in mind, I left Mount Vernon that day discouraged and confused. My main questions were: why is there so much tension surrounding the burial ground? Since the technology was available, and one survey had already been done, why weren’t there markers identifying these gravesites?

These tensions didn’t seem to be coming from Esther, as she went on to explain to us during our tour that she wants a more active relationship with the burial ground. For the past few years, she has sent in proposals to do minimally invasive excavations of the topsoils of some of these graves. As we stood with her on the cobblestone path at the burial ground, Esther explained that her proposal was under board review. If it were accepted, she would break ground in late spring. These excavations would allow her to learn a lot about slave burial practices on the plantation. While she expects that the deceased were buried by other enslaved, she knows very little about how they were laid to rest. Other colonial slave burial sites show a blend of various West African burial practices alongside new ideas. Excavation might allow archaeologists to gain a better understanding of where the enslaved came here from. However, Esther’s daydreams stop at minimal excavations of topsoils. As she explained the next summer in our interview:

I think there are lots of fun questions that could be posed. ‘How many people are there?’ ‘How many of these anomalies can we see?’ ‘Are there 50 or are there 150?’ That’s a big difference. ‘Are they in groupings?’ ‘Are they randomly scattered throughout the whole peninsula?’ ‘Do they intersect each other?’ ‘Are all the bodies in rows?’ ‘Are they oriented east west?’ If I were queen of the world and we did this survey and we were able to make a map to show where people were buried, how neat that would be…what if we

49 The topsoil is the earth used to refill an open grave that can tell an archaeologist factors like size, time period and orientation of the grave.
just put things on a temporary basis when Black Women United for Action hosts a memorial service every fall? You know, what if we put flags or stones or crosses or something back for one event? Wouldn't that be cool to see? Those are all the crazy things that you think about when you're daydreaming.\(^{50}\)

Since I had rough plans to come to Washington DC the following summer and conduct interviews with descendants of people buried in this space, I offered to volunteer for her excavation. In May, a month before she was supposed to start the excavation, Esther sent me an email explaining that her proposal had been denied.

Esther believes that her “daydreams” are farfetched. The MVLA is reluctant to fund any research or major renovations in the burial ground. Esther claims that this tense reaction is partially residual from the movement in 1983 that culminated in the burial ground memorial. She thinks the MVLA was very hurt by the whole situation, and are therefore “hesitant” to bring any more publicity to the burial ground for the fear of more negative backlash from Black communities.

This hesitancy may have been exposed during the 1983 Washington Post scandal, but it was not a result of it. Rather, this has to do with power and authority over visibility in the burial ground and of the individual gravesites. The tug-a-war between what is revealed and what is hidden spurs from how the burial ground was portrayed pre-1983. Before the Washington Post scandal, there was a trail and a small marble plaque marking the burial ground (Figure 8). While this would suggest that the burial ground was available to the public, the trail was unmarked, not a part of the tour guide experience and very difficult to find unless you were looking for it. Thus, by limiting the accessibility of the burial ground, Mount Vernon dominated the space, minimizing its visibility to visitors.

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\(^{50}\) Transcribed interview with Esther taken at her office on July 12\(^{th}\), 2010. Lasted forty minutes. All subsequent quotes of Esther are from this interview.
This is blatant in comparison to George Washington’s ornate tomb, just feet from the slave burial ground (Figure 9). Washington’s marble and brick tomb is a reflection of this, as it is architecturally designed to draw attention. The brick face of the tomb sweeps upward, claiming authority over the surrounding space. Fresh wreaths lean on the walls of the tomb and American flags frame the entryway, which is roped off so visitors keep their distance. A tour guide is constantly stationed in front of it, reciting facts about George Washington’s death and the place where his remains are kept. George Washington’s tomb is presented as an essential part of the Mount Vernon experience, while the slave burial ground is not.

It may be argued that since 1929, the burial ground was an unearthed secret, marked and acknowledged as a burial spot for “colored servants.” At that time, the MVLA declared that the burial ground was in a condition of alarming decay. Minutes from an annual meeting read, "The graveyard which was used by General Washington for his slaves is unmarked. In the course of time it is possible all traces of the graves will disappear. It is recommended that a simple marker, suitably inscribed, be placed on this consecrated ground” (MVLA, 1929). A marble plaque dedicated that same year still lies in a far corner of the burial ground reading: “In Memory of the Many Faithful Colored Servants of the Washington Family Buried at Mount Vernon from 1760 to 1860 - Their unidentified graves surround this spot.” As Esther explained to me, it was significantly progressive that the MVLA had dedicated a plaque to the burial ground as early as 1929. However, the burial ground was still not accessible to most visitors, a secret that was buried in the woods until 1983.

The burial ground continues to spark alternate versions of the uncontested fact that George Washington owned slaves. To some, George Washington was a fair and benevolent
owner. The MVLA argues that his true beliefs on slavery were revealed when he freed his slaves in his will. This is the argument that it presents to visitors. For others, including several of the descendants who spoke with me, what Washington thought about owning slaves doesn’t matter nearly as much as the fact that he owned them. He may be the father of our country, freeing Americans from British “enslavement,” but he deprived many people of their freedom. As a result, this problematizes what George Washington symbolizes for the American people. Thus, the burial ground is a site that challenges the portrayal of a deified George Washington as known to the American public.

While the burial ground is visually accessible, every grave is buried from the public eye. If each resting place were marked, the burial ground could offer a more intimate, powerfully jarring experience to its visitors. Each marker would address slavery as an institution that effected individuals. This close interaction with a painful past is akin to the visitor experience at the United States Holocaust Museum, in which a pile of shoes confiscated from Jewish victims of fatal gassing in internment camps drives home what words cannot describe. Visitors are made to walk through a narrow passageway surrounded by mountains of diverse shoes, representing a large range of ages and economic statuses (Bernenbaum, 2006: 148). These shoes bring a sense of intimacy to the Holocaust, as each pair belongs to a different person who had an unfathomable experience that they did not survive. Each shoe present in the exhibit was the last shoe their owner would ever wear.

Similarly, markers on the burial ground would bring a heightened awareness to visitors of the individuals who were enslaved at Mount Vernon. This is quite different than the current message that the burial ground projects, which is to honor enslaved people buried in unmarked graves. Keeping the exact locations of each burial hidden is a form of spatial domination that
withholds from the visitor a level of intimacy with the people who lived through slavery. This seems even more likely as some of the written records of the burial ground written in the 1920s describe stone markers, either tombstones, or a pile of stones marking the burial site (Thompson, 2013). Thus, as the MVLA’s mission aims to restore George Washington’s home to the way it looked during his lifetime, this seems not to apply to the slave burial ground.

Thus, while conceptions of this space have changed since 1983, there are many unearthed secrets in the woods. Below, Lisa Yoneyama describes how fractured narratives of Hiroshima continue to surface decades later:

Hidden knowledge is not assumed to be anymore complete or more authentic than surface knowledge, and even when it is exposed, ‘the unseen’ does not represent any final truth. The instant it is revealed, it forms yet another layer of surface knowledge that may well conceal other subjugated knowledge (1999, 123).

Multiple fractured truths about Hiroshima mimic narratives of slavery in the sense that we will never have the “complete story.” While much has risen to the surface at Mount Vernon in the last thirty years, truths such as locations of the physical bodies of the enslaved people remain buried from the public eye. The MVLA is not ready to uncloak the invisible, which would mean restoring the burial ground to how it likely looked during George Washington’s lifetime. Thus, the complicated pasts that the burial ground represents come with many layers of truth that rub against one another, creating irritation as often as it inspires healing. Hidden knowledge, as Yoneyama states, can be truth for one and inauthentic to another. In the burial ground, hurt and healing come hand-in-hand, as what one person or group finds therapeutic raises difficult feelings for another. This tug-a-war is key to understanding the current tensions and hesitancies surrounding the slave burial ground at Mount Vernon.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

Raymond leaned toward me, stressing the significance of what he was about to say. Alone in a small community museum in Gum Springs, Virginia, surrounded by portraits of his Black ancestors, Raymond’s words seemed to take on a life of their own. Mount Vernon does not tell the complete story of slavery, he argued, and this is indicative of racial inequalities in modern day Virginia. He concluded,

I think with the passing of time people are going to be able to remove their own little qualms about slavery and tell it for what it is. Whether or not...it makes Mount Vernon look good or bad, whether or not it makes George Washington look good or bad...history needs to be told in regards to what it is. I think it hasn’t until recent years, and within this country it’s still fairly young, the occurrence of it, there are things that can help people cope and deal with the concept of slavery and that it happened in this country, and that is to tell the complete story.

As the only listener of Raymond’s eloquent speech, I was simultaneously in awe and uncomfortable. It seemed Raymond was confronting me, as a White American, about my contributions to how slavery is remembered. I wondered if he was challenging me to meet his expectation—to tell the complete story of slavery at Mount Vernon.

Now, reflecting back on my interview with Raymond in the final pages of this paper, it is easy to see how his statement helped shape my project. He compelled me to envision how I could tell the most accurate version of the past. While I tried combining the narratives in numerous ways, it never seemed possible to get a “whole” picture. My scramble for “the complete” was unsuccessful, because all the interviews and literature I gathered left me with no single story.

My sense of failure, I have come to understand, was because the history of slavery at Mount Vernon is fractured. For a highly charged subject like slavery at Mount Vernon, contradicting versions of the past can turn different groups against each other in a battle for
narrative dominance, painting an incomplete portrait. As Hayden White wrote of constructed narratives like this, “The chronicle usually is marked by a failure to achieve narrative closure. It starts out to tell a story but…it leaves things unresolved, or rather, it leaves them unresolved in a story-like way (1990: 5).” Each person has their piece of the past to share and help shape the way history is constructed and represented to larger audiences. At the same time, for the history of slavery at Mount Vernon, a finished history of slavery seems impossible to tell.

Once I realized I would never be able to tell “the complete story,” I decided to tell the story of the incomplete. This approach seemed to better reflect the many contradictions and antagonisms inherent in personal stories of slavery at Mount Vernon. This line of thinking led me to construct my thesis on alternate and dominant narratives of slavery, and the relationship between them. Thus, rather than piece these fractured histories together to resemble a linear narrative, I have chosen to highlight divergence. Yet, the subject of divergent narratives of slavery far surpasses the pages of this project. One level looks at contemporary narrative divergence between Mount Vernon staff and descendants, while another looks at the whole history of these tensions. Further yet, we can see how these fractured histories surrounding one plantation have sprung from Virginia’s deeply rooted history of slavery.

In this project, I have intentionally left many questions unanswered such as, ‘whose truth is most truthful?’ or ‘whose story best reflects the history of slavery at Mount Vernon?’ My role is not to provide answers, but to deconstruct the questions themselves. These lines of questioning often seek to devalue alternate narratives in favor of Eurocentric, “provable” truths. Differently, I argue that alternate narratives offer valuable insight into the history of slavery at Mount Vernon. These stories are incredibly valuable because they complicate the dominant understanding of the past with plurality and intimacy.
The seven descendant family histories in chapter two help make slavery at Mount Vernon a story about families instead of a story about an institution. In this chapter we meet Zunny, who discovered her Mount Vernon ancestor in a museum exhibit. She used written records to reclaim past generations of family. There is also Steve, who cherishes written documents as a tool to rediscover living family. Gloria and Rohulamin use their knowledge of their family tree to cultivate a reconciliatory relationship with Mount Vernon. Loretta, also a Quander, sees family history research as spiritual enlightenment. To her, discovering family is also discovering pieces of herself. Similarly, cousins Bernita and Don research in order to discover the family histories their grandmother never shared. In a way, they too are reclaiming pieces of themselves through written documents.

While these descendants cherish their family histories, their stories are also valuable in painting a more rounded story of slavery at Mount Vernon. They contribute with what written documents don’t usually encapsulate—the humanity of these enslaved ancestors. It becomes impossible to ignore that people who were enslaved at Mount Vernon were first and foremost mothers and nieces, uncles and sons. The Washingtons might have treated the enslaved as human commodities, but this did not constitute their whole identities. Many belonged to something much more powerful than the institution of slavery—a family.

The power of family is expressed through living heirlooms, these oral histories that surpass the life of the witness. In Chapter three, we see how one descendant family managed to carry a powerful secret since the times of slavery: they believe their ancestor West Ford is the son of George Washington. As Georg Simmel (1950) insightfully insists, the attraction of the secret is intertwined with a desire to share it. Ford’s descendants finally revealed their treasured
secret to Mount Vernon staff in the early 2000s. The conflict that erupted as a result was the height of the West Ford debate.

I use the debate to further analyze the relationship between dominant and alternate narratives, and how this impacts the ways in which the past is told. Chapter three digs deep into issues of representation and truth at Mount Vernon. My aim is not to “prove” whether or not George Washington fathered Ford, but to analyze the politics behind the debate in the early 2000s, and what this tells us of current power relations between Mount Vernon staff and the Ford family descendants. I argue that Mount Vernon staff members continue to dominate the story of slavery at the plantation, using Eurocentric modes of history telling. This pushes to the margins these oral histories that challenge the grand narrative of George Washington and the founding of America. As a result, the Ford family story remains unwelcome at Mount Vernon.

This grand narrative of the first president of the United States was heavily challenged in the events leading up to September 21st, 1983. As I discuss in chapter four, this day was a victory for descendants and their supporters who successfully compelled Mount Vernon staff to dedicate a monument in the slave burial ground. September 21st was a rare moment at Mount Vernon when alternate narratives successfully shifted the dominant narrative. Descendant voices were heard louder than ever before, shaping new expectations for the representation of slave life at Mount Vernon in the decades to come.

The monument encouraged more open discussion of the presentation of slave life. In theory, it was no longer acceptable to refer to the enslaved as “servants,” or gloss over their essential presence on the plantation. However, fractured histories create divergent narratives, allowing for both inclusionary and exclusionary voices to exist in the slave life narrative at
Mount Vernon. For example in the following quote, Mount Vernon’s Head Archaeologist Esther White explains how she observes this push and pull at work everyday.

Even today, you hear people saying, “George Washington painted his walls green.” And the reality is George Washington or his overseer instructed some slaves to do X, Y and Z… There's a hierarchy to things and you know that slaves are actually the ones taking care of stuff. And I don't think that there was much of that being verbally interpreted in the 1980s when I started working at Mount Vernon. I think now there's just much more awareness, lots of things have been written and talked about. You know, conferences and things, and so I think that helps to expand everybody's mindset. That's a good thing.

Esther’s quote exemplifies how alternate and dominant narratives of slavery rub against each other even in the smallest of word choices. Layers of truths about Mount Vernon and slavery exist just below the surface. Yet, newly uncovered truths of historical events won’t necessarily offer closure. There will always be truths about the history of slavery at Mount Vernon waiting to be unearthed.

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Gloria gazed thoughtfully out the window of her sunroom, reflecting on a question I had just posed. “What kinds of steps should Mount Vernon take to tell a more complete version of slavery?” Sipping my lemonade, I waited. Gloria finally looked back at me, crafting her answer, “I’m glad that they are telling the story of how these people lived.” Much differently than Raymond, Gloria felt Mount Vernon was making great strides to improve its representation of slave life. She suggested that Mount Vernon should keep doing what it is already doing, which is telling a more complex narrative.

After all, the people Mount Vernon researches are her family. She is a descendant of Suckey Bay, an enslaved seamstress, whose life was spent in forced service to the Washingtons. The more Mount Vernon discovers about Suckey Bay, the more Gloria can add to her family tree. Through this research into written records, Gloria can strengthen her ties to her ancestor. Yet,
while Gloria looks to Suckey Bay to uncover narratives of her family story, perhaps we should also look for what Gloria can tell us about Suckey Bay. Like other descendants, she is living proof that the enslaved at Mount Vernon had lives beyond serving the Washingtons. Many also raised new generations. Gloria exemplified this theme of family endurance when she compared her granddaughter to her enslaved ancestor.

Now that I know more about my connection with Mount Vernon, to Suckey Bay, I’m proud to know that there was someone able to just endure the life that she had to live there, and have a daughter at eleven years old being a spinner. My granddaughter, I can’t imagine her doing something like that at this time, you know? All she wants to do is play. Right now she’s at camp!

Here, Gloria reflects on a multi-generational journey in just a few sentences. While Suckey Bay’s life and Gloria’s granddaughter’s life are incredibly different, they are also intertwined. One can trace their connection through the branches of their shared family tree. Thus, descendants reclaim their family by constructing alternate narratives of slavery at Mount Vernon, remembering the people they come from. This is a legacy that will survive much longer than any era in American history.

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51 Gloria’s granddaughter was nine years old in 2010 at the time of this interview.
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Figure 1. Slave Memorial-Mount Vernon. Source: Sarah Stierch, Mount Vernon, VA. June 20, 2009.

Figure 2. Maria Carter Syphax, c. 1860. Daguerreotype. Silver-coated copper plate, L 8.4, W 7 cm.
Arlington House: The Robert E. Lee Memorial, Virginia. From:

Figure 3. Syphax Family Reunion Group Photo in front of the Arlington House. Digital Image. Accessed from:

Figure 4. House For Families. Reconstruction of 19th Century Slave Cabin. Mount Vernon Ladies Association, Virginia. From:

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Figure 6. Visual Comparison of George Washington and West Ford. Digital Image of Paintings. Accessed from:

Figure 7. Cover of the first edition of “I Cannot Tell a Lie: The True Story of George Washington’s Afro-American Descendants.” Linda Allen Bryant. Accessed from:

Figure 8. Marble Marker at Slave Burial Ground at Mount Vernon, dedicated 1929. Accessed From: