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by Justin Gunther
Throughout the country, in small towns and big cities, Mount Vernon is a constant presence. The historic house’s distinctive architectural elements show up on countless buildings, both residential and commercial. Mount Vernon’s unique two-story piazza, a George Washington innovation, is the most copied component of the Mansion and has become one of the most identifiable features of American architecture. Why did Mount Vernon become such a popular design source? How did the house become a national symbol, one providing inspiration to building designers across America? This article examines those questions by tracing the popularization of Mount Vernon, beginning the analysis with George Washington, the house’s original architect.

Washington emerged from the Revolution as the central figure in the American consciousness. A man of uncompromising principles, noble carriage, and impenetrable dignity, Washington commanded an intense respect in his role as hero and president of the new republic. After his death on December 14, 1799, the mourning nation elevated Washington to an almost godlike status. The apotheosis of Washington gave the fragile American experiment a symbol of strength, and his spirit became a foundation for the nation’s identity.

To experience his spirit firsthand, Americans and foreigners alike visited Mount Vernon. Washington’s beloved plantation, more than anywhere else, became a tangible reminder of the founding father, a materialization of his character and ideals. With their humility and grandeur, the buildings and gardens presented visitors with a reflection of Washington’s pragmatic yet sophisticated mind. The hoards of travelers eager to walk the hallowed ground were hosted by descendants of the Washington family, who continued to own Mount Vernon during the first half of the 19th century.

Tourism developed as a national pastime during this period. By the 1830s, America was no longer engaged in wars or preoccupied with clearing wilderness to establish cities. Transportation vastly improved with the construction of turnpikes, invention of the steamboat, building of canals, and birth of the railroad industry. Such conditions allowed people to focus more on leisure time and travel, and tourism played an important role in the creation of an American culture. Establishing tourist sites during the country’s infancy helped shape the nation’s identity and position on the world stage. Mount Vernon, the home of the most revered American, was quickly adopted as a destination and became a significant component of the national image.

Similar to other 19th-century tourist attractions, Mount Vernon functioned as a sacred place. In Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture, Victor and Edith Turner suggest, “Some form of deliberate travel to a far place intimately associated with the deepest, most cherished, axiomatic values of the traveler seems to be a ‘cultural universal.’ If it is not religiously sanctioned, counseled, or encouraged, it will take other forms.” A country founded on religious freedom, early America embraced tourist attractions rather than specific religious sites as its destinations for pilgrimage. Places of exceptional beauty and locations associated with famous people or events appealed to people of all religious persuasions and served as points of national unity. Visiting Mount Vernon gave travelers the opportunity to connect with one of the greatest and noblest men in history and escape to a place that stood apart from ordinary reality. The patriotic journey to Mount Vernon was seen as a way to improve one’s character and support the nation by fostering an appreciation for the country’s founding values.

During the 1850s, many Virginia plantations suffered from the gradual elimination of profits resulting from the exhaustion of soils and changing market forces. Among them was Mount Vernon, and these conditions forced John Augustine Washington, Jr., the final family owner, to sell the estate. Understanding the importance of preserving his ancestor’s home, he refused to surrender the property to speculators. He approached both the federal government and the Commonwealth of Virginia, but politicians were preoccupied with debates over land and slavery that would eventually lead to the Civil War.

Luckily, a group of women under the direction of Ann Pamela Cunningham banded together to raise the necessary funds. They created an organization called the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union with the mission to restore the severely decayed Mount Vernon and open its doors to the public as a museum. John Augustine Washington, Jr., agreed to sell them the estate after much negotiation, signing a contract of sale in 1858. With no standards to follow, the Ladies’ Association diligently undertook the challenging task of restoration. In her farewell address to fellow board members, Cunningham challenged the Ladies’ Association to “let no irreverent hand change it; no vandal hands desecrate it with the hands of—progress! Those who go to the Home in which he lived and died, wish to see in what he lived and died.”

The saving of Mount Vernon marked the birth of America’s preservation movement and established a model for the creation of national shrines.

Central to the success of Mount Vernon as a museum was improving access to the estate. After the Civil War, regular steamboat service from Washington, D.C., provided an alternative to traversing the notoriously bad roads of the
area. Between 1892 and 1896, the Washington, Alexandria, 
& Mount Vernon Electric Railway was constructed creating a 
cheap, convenient, and extremely popular way to make 
the journey. As automobiles became the preferred mode 
of transportation, Congress authorized the construction of the 
Mount Vernon Memorial Highway in 1928. This parkway, 
linking Arlington Memorial Bridge to Mount Vernon, 
was completed in 1932, a symbolic year marked by the 
nationwide celebration of the bicentennial of Washington’s 
birth. Praised as “America’s Most Modern Motorway,” 
the road was “the ultimate blend of modern engineering, 
landscape architecture, historic preservation, and patriotic 
sentiment.”

Coupled with the draw of George Washington, Mount 
Vernon’s accessibility from the capital city made the house 
museum one of the most visited in the world. Swarmed by 
tourists, Mount Vernon became known as “The Mecca of 
America.” The millions that toured the plantation took 
with them the image of Washington’s home, making Mount 
Vernon a familiar visual component within their psyche. 
The intense pride felt by visitors ingrained the experience as 
sacred in their minds.

Those unable to travel to Virginia in the 19th 
and early 20th centuries experienced Mount Vernon 
through publications, prints, postcards, and decorative 
arts. Engravings of Mount Vernon appeared in widely 
circulated periodicals like Harper’s Weekly and Frank Leslie’s 
Illustrated Newspaper; travel volumes like Nathaniel P. 
Willis and William H. Bartlett’s American Scenery, and 
books like Benson J. Lossing’s Mount Vernon and 
Its Associations.

Lithographs 
of Mount Vernon 
by Currier and Ives, who 
described themselves as “Publishers 
of Cheap and Popular Pictures,” were widely 
purchased due to their affordability and hung in homes 
throughout America. Pictures of Mount Vernon were 
so common that John S. Adams wrote in his 1856 book 
Town and Country; or, Life at Home and Abroad, “The 
house I need not describe, as most persons are acquainted 
with its appearance, from seeing the numerous engraved 
representations of it.” Postcards became popular in the 
early 1900s, and their prolific circulation spread the Mount 
Vernon image. Tourists to Mount Vernon chronicled their 
visit by sending postcards of the house and grounds to 
friends and family who could not come along. Lastly, 
decorative arts like Seth Thomas clocks, Staffordshire plates, 
Whelan sterling silver spoons, and even kitschy souvenirs like 
pennants were adorned with the image of Mount Vernon, 
adding a bit of patriotic value to these objects and reminding 
their owners of Washington’s home.

Expositions coupled with the Colonial Revival were 
also instrumental in popularizing Mount Vernon. Historians 
trace the beginnings of the Colonial Revival to the 1876 
Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. Held in the city 
deemed sacred for its association with the Declaration 
of Independence, the show commemorated the nation’s 
100th birthday. Even though the exposition highlighted 
the latest technological wonders, visitors got caught up in 
the celebratory spirit of the country’s founding. They were 
entranced by the “Colonial Kitchen,” an allegedly accurate 
depiction of early American life. Such romanticized 
interpretations of the past established the basis for the 
Colonial Revival movement, a socially constructed ideal 
that looked to early America for both inspiration and answers 
to modern problems. As historian Mary Miley Theobald 
points out, “Unsettled times often encourage people to 
turn to the past. Americans of the late nineteenth century 
had only to look back one hundred years to see an era that 
by comparison looked idyllic: a Golden Age of American 
values.” Reviving all things colonial became an antidote to 
societal ills like economic depression, rampant corruption 
in government, and increasing European immigration that 
threatened the “real” America.

Colonial became the undisputed national style after 
the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893. Although a 
year late, the exposition celebrated the 400th anniversary of 
Columbus’s discovery of America. 
Pavilions for the eastern states 
competed 
with one another for 
colonial ambience. Massachusetts 
reconstructed the John Hancock House, 
Pennsylvania replicated Independence Hall, New Jersey 
and Connecticut re-created rooms where Washington slept, 
and New York showcased Washington relics. But Virginia 
reproduced the ultimate symbol of colonial America— 
Mount Vernon. The millions that visited the exposition saw 
this reconstruction complete with portraits and furniture 
resembling the originals. With Mount Vernon as the pinnacle 
example, colonial was promoted as the most fashionable 
arrestural style.

Faithful reconstructions of Mount Vernon were 
later included in the exhibition buildings of the 1915 
Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco; 
the 1926 Sesquicentennial International Exposition in 
Philadelphia; the 1931 Exposition Coloniale Internationale 
de Paris; and the 1932 George Washington Bicentennial 
Celebration in Brooklyn, New York. Of particular note is 
the use of Mount Vernon as the American building at the
Exposition Coloniale Internationale (see image at right). Clearly, Americans considered Mount Vernon a national symbol that embodied the country’s current tastes and values. Somewhat ironic though was the choice of Mount Vernon, the home of the leader of a revolution against colonial tyranny, for an exposition honoring European and American colonization. Surrounding the Mount Vernon replica were cottages featuring displays of objects from Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Samoa, all territories of America’s burgeoning empire. Particularly pleasing to the French was the inclusion of a bedroom in the Mansion interpreted as the guest room of Lafayette.20

The Home Construction Division of Sears, Roebuck and Company was chosen as the contractor for erecting the Mount Vernon reproductions at both the Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris and the George Washington Bicentennial Celebration in Brooklyn.21 These opportunities prompted the company to offer a Mount Vernon-inspired house as part of their 1930s line of mail-order catalog homes. Called “The Jefferson,” the model capitalized on the name of another founding father, but the two-story, square-columned front porch and whitewashed brick walls with green shutters were “designed along the same lines of historic Mt. Vernon [because] this southern colonial home spells success.”22 Not as conservative as the popular bungalow models, “The Jefferson” kit had a price tag over $3,000 and provided materials and instructions to build an eight-room, two-bath house (see image at right).23

Sears was not the only company to promote suburban homes in the form of Mount Vernon. Developers across the country took advantage of Mount Vernon’s popularity and that of the Colonial Revival style. The architecture’s uncomplicated forms were simple to design and build, and Mount Vernon’s distinctive two-story piazza could
be easily added to homes with a basic rectangular plan. A more romantic notion called “associationism” provides further explanation as to why houses were patterned on Mount Vernon. The idea that architecture shaped character led people to purchase homes that personified noble colonial virtues. In addition, the chasteness and restraint in form was refreshing to those raised in the Victorian era, providing an escape from the decorative abundance and ornamental fuss that surrounded them in their childhood.

The use of Mount Vernon’s motifs was not limited to residential architecture. The house’s architectural elements were adapted to lend distinction to a wide array of commercial buildings. The District of Columbia’s National Airport, now Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, is a particularly remarkable example (see image below). A project of the New Deal, National Airport replaced the highly inadequate and unsafe Washington-Hoover Airport. President Franklin Roosevelt worked with architect Howard Lovewell Cheney to create a new terminal building in keeping with the neoclassical style of the capital. The front was designed to have a colonnade of eight slender columns, reminiscent of the piazza at George Washington’s home a few miles downriver. This motif was repeated on the airfield side by placing columns in front of a curving glass wall. Mount Vernon’s cupola was reconstituted as an all-glass control booth centered atop the new terminal. Pushing the association to Washington even further was the site of the new facility, Gravelly Point. This 750-acre parcel of land on the western banks of the Potomac River was historically the location of the Alexander family’s Abingdon Plantation. In 1777, John Parke Custis, the stepson of George Washington, purchased Abingdon, and the home was later the birthplace of Washington’s beloved granddaughter Eleanor “Nelly” Parke Custis.

When completed in 1941, the National Airport’s modernist colonial shell concealed one of the period’s most technologically advanced terminals. The Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) promoted National as its model airport, complete with automated baggage systems, a control tower with electronic progress boards adapted from devices used on Wall Street, and runways designed to support the new generation of planes. Officially called the “people’s airport,” National was built entirely with public funds and was hailed as the threshold to the nation. To remind people of the airport’s symbolism, the CAA published a pamphlet with a rendering of the terminal hovering between the Congress building and Mount Vernon and declared, “Visitors and Washingtonians will flock to the field as to one of their favorite parks.”

Travelers taking to the roads rather than the air encountered motels designed with Mount Vernon in mind. These motels, which often included “Mount Vernon” in their names to reinforce the connection, were built along major highways throughout the country. In Florida, for example, a chain of four Mount Vernon Motor Lodges existed along Route 1 stretching from Jacksonville to Miami (see image at left). Owners of roadside motels betted on traveler’s familiarity with Mount Vernon, hoping a columned portico and a cupola would give their establishment an edge. It is human nature to search for comfort in the unfamiliar, so after hours of exhaustive driving, motorists searched out stops that seemed pleasant,
relaxing, and familiar. A motel resembling Mount Vernon exuded those characteristics and was a welcome sight to weary travelers (see images below).

From the late 1930s to the early '50s, savvy motel proprietors built Mount Vernon-inspired motels adjacent to Howard Johnson’s restaurants up and down the east coast. The Mount Vernon style complimented the restaurants’ formulaic, colonial design, which included white clapboards, dormers, and a cupola with a weathervane. Although not colonial, each Howard Johnson’s was topped with the company’s eye-catching, trademark orange roof. Howard Johnson’s popularity with motorists made this motif an icon of the American road, and coupling the orange roof with the columns of America’s signature home proved to be a lucrative combination.

Noticing the success of these motels, the Howard Johnson Company entered the lodging business, franchising their first Howard Johnson’s Motor Lodge in December 1953. An existing motel with Mount Vernon-esque features in Savannah, Georgia, was updated and a Howard Johnson’s restaurant built adjacent (see image page 12). This Savannah location provided Northeasterners with a convenient overnight stop as they journeyed to and from Florida.

Other examples of Mount Vernon-inspired commercial buildings populate the American landscape. They exist in a diversity and number that are astounding. Some of these maintain loose associations to Mount
Vernon while others are almost exact replicas. Besides airports and motels, there are gas stations, convenience stores, shopping malls, warehouses, funeral homes, banks, and office buildings. Examples include California Federal Bank, Los Angeles, California; Mountcastle Funeral Home, Woodbridge, Virginia (see image opposite page); Daughters of the American Revolution offices, Seattle, Washington; and Mount Vernon Self Storage, Richmond, Virginia (see image page 6). The Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association maintains a listing of these buildings on their website, and welcomes suggestions for additions.33

From high style to everyday, residential to commercial, buildings across the United States feature designs fashioned on Mount Vernon. The house’s distinct elements have become significant components of the American architectural vocabulary. Both the trained and inexperienced eye can identify Mount Vernon’s influence on the built environment. Combined with the need for a national identity, the house’s popularization through tourism, print media, decorative arts, and expositions elevated Mount Vernon from a family home to an archetype of American strength and endurance. George Washington’s contributions to architecture have embedded themselves into our culture, serving as symbolic reminders of the father and foundation of our nation.  

5. Sears, 6-7.
7. Ibid.
8. Anne Pamela Cunningham to the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association, June 1, 1874: published in Minutes of the Council of the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association of the Union, 1874, 6.
11. The original source of the term “Mecca of America” is not known. It appears to have originated in tourist guidebooks and popular magazines of the 19th century.
12. Engravings of Mount Vernon appeared in numerous issues of Harper’s Weekly and Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper. William H. Bartlett’s well-known engraving of Mount Vernon is found in Nathaniel Parker Willis, American Scenery; or, Land, Lake, and River Illustrations of Transatlantic Nature (London: George Virtue, 1840). Benson J. Lossing’s engravings of Mount Vernon, which were also featured in Harper’s Weekly, can be seen in a number of his books about Mount Vernon, one being Mount Vernon and Its Associations, Historical, Biographical, and Pictorial (New York: W.A. Townsend and Company, 1859).
14. John Stowell Adams, Town and Country; or, Life at Home and Abroad, Without and Within Us (Boston: J. Buffum, 1856), 368.
A description of the Mount Vernon replica built for the Columbian Exposition can be found in Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair: An Historical and Descriptive Presentation of the World’s Science, Art, and Industry, as Viewed through the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893* (Chicago: The Bancroft Company, 1895), 787-88. See also *The World’s Columbian Exhibition: State Buildings, Portfolio of Views* (Chicago and St. Louis: National Chemigraph Company, 1893).


Shirley Maxwell and James C. Massey, “The Story on Sears: Houses by Rail and Mail,” *Old House Journal* 30, no. 4 (July/August 2002): 50. Architectural plans used by Sears, Roebuck and Company for the Mount Vernon replica at both the Exposition Coloniale Internationale and George Washington Bicentennial were drawn by Richmond architect Charles K. Bryant and are in the Mount Vernon Ladies’ Association Restoration Department collection.


Ibid.


Theobald, 83.


Gordon, 121.


John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, *Fast Food: Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); 73-76.


Examples of architecture inspired by Mount Vernon are collected and listed by the Mount Vernon Restoration Department and are available online at http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/pres_arch/index.cfm/pid/624/.