Mount Vernon and pattern books

Washington was an American Palladian with the confidence to break rules

By Justin Gunther

As he renovated and enlarged his iconic estate at Mount Vernon, primarily in three major building programs, George Washington was acutely aware of prevailing trends in architectural fashion. Yet Mount Vernon is, more than anything else, a reflection of Washington himself. His humility, practicality, honesty, and complexity are revealed in every element of the mansion and its landscape.

Mount Vernon must be studied alongside Washington's life. As he made the gradual ascension from frontier surveyor to first President and father of his country, Washington remodeled Mount Vernon to express his societal position. Although a reflection of British tastes, Washington's desire for a 'republican style of living' created a uniquely American interpretation. Mount Vernon began as a simple double-pile Georgian, was transformed into a mansion in the five-part British Palladian mode, and ended as one of early America's grandest houses complete with Adamesque decoration. FIG. 1. In examining the house's evolution, discussing the influence of prevailing tastes along the way, one sees how Washington drew from personal experience and from pattern book plates to produce a work of architecture distinctly his own.

The plantation, first known as Little Hunting Creek, had been in the Washington family since 1674. George's elder half brother, Lawrence, named the property Mount Vernon in honor of his former naval commander. Around 1743, Lawrence constructed a one-and-a-half-story house on the Potomac bluff. The main floor contained a wide central passage with two rooms on either side. Pairs of outbuildings, set at an angle to the house and connected by fences, framed the approach and created a forecourt with a circular drive.

Tuberculosis claimed Lawrence's life in 1752, and the property passed to his widow. George Washington started leasing Mount Vernon from his sister-in-law in 1754, but he quickly became entrenched in his military career, serving as commander of the Virginia regiment in the French and Indian War. The position took him far afield, exposing him to significant architecture throughout the colonies. Washington quickly realized that Mount Vernon was both outdated and far too small. Political aspirations and his courtship of Virginia's richest widow, Martha Dandridge Custis, were further motivation to improve his outmoded seat.

In 1757-58, Washington started a major campaign of improvements to Mount Vernon. He raised the roof and created a full second floor and a new attic. In the central passage, the walls were paneled and the staircase rebuilt in black walnut. The small dining room was covered with an embossed crimson paper and the west parlor

FIG. 1. George Washington's Mount Vernon, west façade, as completed by 1787.

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By the end of 1758, the remodeling was nearing completion. With victory at Fort Duquesne securing British control of the frontier, Washington resigned from his military career and married Martha Custis. The wealth she brought into the union placed the Washingtons in a small circle of Virginians at the pinnacle of society. In 1761, Washington's lease of Mount Vernon ended with his inheritance of the property after the death of his brother's widow. Throughout the 1760s, Washington adopted the lifestyle of a Virginia planter and transformed Mount Vernon into a gentry seat.

In 1773, Washington started planning another sweeping remodeling, one that would give the house its present size and principal features. A rather rudimentary drawing done by Washington shows a doubling in length, an increase in height, and the addition of a pediment and cupola. To determine the overall form, Washington paneled from floor to ceiling. The alterations did have one negative effect, however: the width of the passage and the layout of the landside rooms resulted in window asymmetry.

While Washington's pragmatism allowed him to compromise symmetry on the exterior, he spared no expense on interior furnishings and modifications. For decorative motifs, Washington consulted popular British pattern books. These widely-circulated publications promoted the neo-Palladianism adopted by Whig Britain. Colonial Virginia's tastes followed those of Britain, and Washington incorporated details from these sources to conform to trends.

For the west parlor, Washington consulted Batty Langley's *Treasury of Designs*. The entablatures of the elaborately pedimented door frames were taken from the 'Ionick Entablature' illustrated on plate VI. The capitals, based on Palladio's rendition of the Ionic, were derived from another source, possibly Batty and Thomas Langley's *Builder's Jewel*, plate 23. Fig. 2. Palladio's capital was not illustrated in *Treasury of Designs*, which instead followed Inigo Jones's precedent at the Banqueting House, combining Scamozzi's capital with Palladio's entablature. The use of Palladio's capital in colonial architecture was rare, and why it showed up at Mount Vernon is unclear.

Perhaps it was the limited skill of the craftsman, for the angled volutes, or three-dimensionality, of Scamozzi's required greater expertise than the more two-dimensional Palladian capital.

Inspiration for the fireplace and overmantel of the west parlor came from Abraham Swan's *British Architect*, plates 50 and 51. Fig. 3. The executed design is a simplified blend of the two. This fireplace inserts an element of Rococo into the space, which initially may seem to conflict with the straight Palladianism of the doorways but reconciles itself as an expression of Washington's willingness to mix styles and motifs.

With respect to the other first-floor rooms, pattern books were minimally at play. However, in an attempt to unify and enrich the exterior, Washington directed the installation of wood siding cut to simulate rusticated stonework. The likely source was *Builder's Jewel*, plate 75. Fig. 4. Mount Vernon's cornice profile is identical to that of the 'block cornice' shown at the upper right, and the 'V' joints of the quoins match the rustication on the house. Although the concept for rusticating the entire façade may have originated elsewhere, such as Washington's exposure to Newport's Redwood Library, the similarities suggest this plate was the direct source for the house's overall vertical profile.
the small dining room was updated by floor and master bedroom above. Then, the south containing a study on the first. Construction began with an addition to the hands of Lund Washington, a cousin. The management of the alterations was left in command the Continental Army, so Washington to leave Mount Vernon to the start of the Revolution soon forced the Palladian influence to give Mount Vernon a five-part plan. He called for the exterior, which he expanded with Washington's brother-in-law at Kenmore, components of the ceiling were derived from Plate 62. Fig. 5.

Framing of the large dining room addition to the north started in 1776, and Washington wrote, 'I would have the whole executed in a masterly manner.' The house's most architecturally ambitious room, the large dining room, when completed twelve years later, would be a reflection of Washington's stature and wealth. For the north wall of this room, Washington had his carpenter Going Lanphier install a Venetian window, rather faithfully derived from Plate 51 of Treasury of Designs. Fig. 7.

Although the interior arrangement, with its wide central passage and grand staircase, was rooted in Georgian tradition, Washington departed from the house's past for the exterior, which he expanded with British Palladian influence to give Mount Vernon a five-part plan. He called for the demolition of Lawrence Washington's axially-aligned dependencies and had a new kitchen and servants' quarters constructed in 1775-76 with orientations perpendicular to the main house.

What makes Mount Vernon's five-part plan unusual is the transparency of the arcaded quadrant wings. Traditionally, such wings had at least one closed side, specifically to hide services. As Scott Owen points out in his graduate thesis, the opening up of the arcades was Washington's solution to provide 'a beautiful framed view of the river.' The wings conform to the British Palladian five-part form, but they do so with an originality and uncommon purpose. More than just covered walkways linking the main block to the service blocks, Mount Vernon's quadrant wings express Washington's love of nature and desire to highlight the prospect, one which Polish nobleman Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz described as 'perhaps the most beautiful view in the world.'

The open arcades' square Tuscan piers also connect stylistically to the main house. Their form is very similar to the pilasters of the Venetian window, and Washington expanded upon this form, elongating it for the columns of the piazza. Added in 1777, the piazza, or porch, was yet another Washington solution to enjoy the magnificent Potomac view. Its great height, broad sweep, and stretched proportions were a clear departure from popular classical tastes.

Back on the west front, Washington added the Tuscan doorway, the pediment, and the cupola by 1778. The front door surround, copied from Batty Langley's plates, strengthened the Tuscan theme of the exterior. The pediment, adorned with an ocular window copied from Plate 54 of Treasury of Designs, formalized the façade and defined the center of the house. Washington incorporated the atypical feature of a cove to give the pediment more prominence. Fig. 6. The window asymmetry prevented him from using a more common solution, such as installing a pair of pilasters or projecting outward the entire central block under the pediment. To complete his composition Washington crowned Mount Vernon with a cupola. Symbolically, the feature defined the house's societal importance. Practically, the cupola helped draw out hot summer air. And Washington positioned it a few feet off center to the south, a last ditch effort to alleviate the window asymmetry.

With the house largely finished, Washington demonstrated a clear understanding of classical orders by presenting the decoration of the house in a logical hierarchy. The exterior was designed to be purely Tuscan, the most rustic and strongest of the orders. Entering the central passage, the Tuscan was continued in the doorway pediments and cornice, providing a link between external and internal space. The flow of the house then progressed into the Ionic west parlor and culminated in the large dining room.
FIG. 6. Mount Vernon’s pediment is projected on a coved cornice, which Washington planned to be the most ornate and public space.

When Washington returned home after the Revolution in 1783, only the large dining room still required substantial work. He planned the room to measure 32 feet long by 24 feet wide by 16 feet high. With a coved ceiling, a Venetian window, and a 16-foot height half the 32-foot length, Washington was clearly intending the space to follow a basic British Palladian motif—the double cube room.

The interior decoration was executed by John Rawlins, an English stucco worker out of Baltimore who was well versed in the new Adam style. The dignified restraint and lightness of the Adamesque ornament must have appealed to Washington, not to mention the inclusion of agricultural motifs in door friezes and in the four panels of the ceiling plasterwork. FIG. 5. The decoration of this room inspired Washington to update the west parlor ceiling, and in 1787 an associate of Rawlins installed an Adamesque ceiling there.

Washington’s willingness to incorporate the Adam style further conveys his desire to keep Mount Vernon modern. He was keeping abreast of trends, accepting a Neoclassicism that was moving away from Palladian traditions. And although Washington did not realize it, he had been practicing the mode of Adam for over a decade. As architectural historian Sir John Summerson states, ‘to an architect of the Palladian School [an architectural element] was more or less an inflexible thing . . . To Adam, on the other hand, it was a thing whose qualities could be abstracted and then rendered back with an infinity of variation.’ With almost all the principal features that make Mount Vernon recognizable—its piazza, its quadrant wings, its asymmetry, and its manipulation of proportions—Washington and his craftsmen revised and reconstituted the antique into unique and pleasing solutions. As Washington would write in a letter to architect William Thornton, it was within his ‘rules of Architecture’ to ‘make small departures from strict rules’ to create ‘things not quite orthodox.’

In April 1789, the Presidency took Washington from Mount Vernon once again. When he returned to retire in March 1797, he found a home in serious need of repair and updating. Rooms were repainted, the central passage faux finished to look like mahogany, and the Washington's bedchamber decorated with an American paper indicative of the emerging, and more republican, Federal style.

Washington died in 1799, but what he left behind is an essay in architecture that is truly one-of-a-kind and one that mirrors his life. Yes, Washington was an amateur, but he successfully transformed a modest farm into one of the great estates of the eighteenth century. As British historian John Harris writes, ‘the pleasure in studying these amateurs is less in trying to categorize them, than to enjoy the diversity of their architectural accomplishments. Their work rises to distinction owing to an untrammeled attitude to design.’

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