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Do you know the history of these Virginia homes of Presidents?

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Even though he spent much of his life away from home, President George Washington's heart was always in Virginia. The same was true for President Thomas Jefferson. He often spoke of Monticello, his beautiful home just outside of Charlottesville. As residents, they both saw the beautiful, rich land in Virginia as a place they wanted to call home.

Today you can travel around the state and see how these Presidential and other famous Virginians lived by visiting their homes. These beautiful homes help explain how these men lived during the birth of our country.

George Washington's Mount Vernon

Located just a short drive down the parkway with his name is the home of our first president. Originally called "Mansion House Farm," Mount Vernon sits on a bluff overlooking the Potomac River. It was originally built as a modest house in 1734 by his father, Augustine Washington.

After taking over the plantation from his brother, George Washington put two major additions onto Mount Vernon. In June 1775, Congress commissioned Major George Washington to take command of the Continental Army, which kept him away from Mount Vernon for more than eight years.

After the war, Washington devoted his time to rebuilding Mount Vernon. In 1787, Washington traveled to Philadelphia to become President of the United States.

After his presidency, President Washington returned to Mount Vernon and tended to repairs to the buildings, socializing and gardening until he died in 1799. The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association purchased Mount Vernon from the Washington family in 1858 and opened the estate to the public in 1860. Since that time, nearly 80 million visitors have toured the 14 rooms open to the public. Mount Vernon contains many of the original furnishings, including his presidential chair and the actual bed where he died. Also, there are ten outbuildings (such as the kitchen, smokehouse, and stables) and the gardens that Washington tended. Traveling down the road from the main house was another of Washington's business ventures.

"George Washington was the largest American whiskey producer during his time, and Mount Vernon has recreated the original structures based on archeological excavations at the site," according to Matt Briney, Vice President, Media & Communications at George Washington's Mount Vernon. "Today, guests can see the original copper stills and purchase a bottle of his famous whiskey, which is made today using the same methods he used in the late 1700s."

George Mason's Gunston Hall

One of Washington's neighbors was George Mason. A fourth-generation Virginian, Mason lived on a 550-acre site called Gunston Hall — a tobacco and wheat plantation overlooking the Potomac. Located on Mason Neck, the tree-lined driveway provides a canopy type entranceway guiding you to the centerpiece of the plantation — the Gunston Hall mansion. William Buckland designed and built the two-story brick house in 1755 in traditional Georgian architecture featuring impressive woodcarvings.

As you walk through the front door, the center hallway is open and airy. There are four rooms on the main floor. To the right is the formal dining room and parlor. On the other side are the master bedroom and Mason's study. It is here where Mason did much of his writing. The room features his original writing table where he wrote, "That all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights . . . namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty."

Does that sound familiar? It's an excerpt from the Virginia Declaration of Rights. The Virginia Convention passed that document in June 1776. His friend Thomas Jefferson liked the wording and used it as the basis for a manuscript he was working on — the Declaration of Independence.



As a statesman and writer, Mason was one of the framers of the U.S. Constitution. During the summer, he argued about what should be in this critical document. In the end, he was one of three delegates that did not sign Jefferson's document because he opposed the fact that it did not contain the Bill of Rights.

In the years that followed, Mason was one of the first statesmen to call for fundamental American liberties such as religious toleration and freedom of the press. He eventually got his way when a fellow Virginian, James Madison, introduced the Bill of Rights to Congress.

James Madison's Montpelier

President James Madison lived across the Virginia Piedmont in Orange. As the home of our fourth President, the Georgian style home was a gift from his parents and is located in the shadows of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Known as the "Father of the Constitution," Madison was one of the most influential Founding Fathers. As a prolific writer, he was the principal author of the document that guides this country. He also helped draft many laws that became the foundation of our way of life. Madison believed the new republic needed checks and balances to limit the powers of special interests. As one of the Federalist Papers' authors, Madison wanted to influence the vote in favor of ratification and shape future interpretations of the Constitution. To that end, he took George Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights and turned it into the first ten amendments to the Constitution — making Madison known as the Father of the Bill of Rights.

After his Presidency, President Madison retired to Montpelier. He spent his final days re-writing his notes — the best account of the Continental Congress. Madison died of rheumatism on June 28, 1836, making him the last person alive who signed the Declaration of Independence.

After President Madison, different people owned the house until the duPont family purchased Montpelier in 1901. They made significant changes, expanding the house into a mansion by adding 33 rooms. The house was passed to the National Trust for Historic Preservation when owner Marion duPont Scott died. Today the National Trust restored Montpelier to the way it looked when Madison retired from office.

Thomas Jefferson's Monticello

Traveling south just past Charlottesville is the home of our third president, Thomas Jefferson. Located on top of a mountain is Monticello, which means little mountain in Italian, the centerpiece of the plantation.

Born just down the road, Jefferson inherited 3,000 acres from his father, the surveyor Peter Jefferson. It was his retreat from "the hated occupation of politics." As the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, he was one of our most influential founding fathers. His accomplishments as President include the Louisiana Purchase (1803) and the Lewis and Clark Expedition (1804–1806).

At the end of his Presidency, President Jefferson returned to Monticello to enjoy “the tranquil pursuits of science.” Jefferson was fascinated with astronomy and the natural world around him. Based on early Roman architecture, Monticello is a study of the advancement of thought. From the early Venetian blinds between the southwest portico columns to provide shade to the dumbwaiter that carried wine from the wine cellar to the Dining Room, these innovations reflected Jefferson’s pursuits of comfort and convenience. It could be as simple as the clothes pole in his closet to his “bed in the wall,” Jefferson’s use of space was quite advanced. Just coming through the front door was an experience. From the specialized clock that displays the time of day and week, the front hall depicted his many loves of the outdoor world.

During his retirement, he became increasingly obsessed with higher learning institutions. Specifically, he was interested a place free of church influences where students could specialize in many new areas not offered at other universities. The realization of Jefferson’s dream was the University of Virginia that started admitting students in 1825.

This tour has only scratched the surface by highlighting some of the famous homes located in Virginia. There are many other examples of residences that help shape this country. One of Jefferson’s neighbors is Ash Lawn-Highland — home of our fifth President, James Monroe. Just down the Potomac River from President James Madison’s house is Stratford Hall, home of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. If you’re going to be near the Virginia Eastern shore, stop by Berkeley Plantation, the home of our ninth President, Benjamin Harrison. For more information about these and other famous homes in Virginia, check out the state of Virginia website virginia.org

