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Scott E. Casper. *Sarah Johnson's Mount Vernon: The Forgotten History of an American Shrine.* New York: Hill & Wang, 2008. 320 pp. $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-8414-2.

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African Americans at Mount Vernon: A New View of an American Shrine

When President George Washington passed away in 1799, his plantation home, Mount Vernon, became an American shrine. In the 1800s, visitors from all over the nation made pilgrimages to the site to pay honor to the founding father of the United States. Ironically, those visitors received their interpretation of President Washington not from his white descendants but largely from an African American community that called Mount Vernon home. *Sarah Johnson's Mount Vernon: The Forgotten History of an American Shrine*, by Scott E. Casper, serves as a memorial to those African Americans, both enslaved and free, who lived and labored at Washington's plantation.

In the mid-to-late decades of the twentieth century, broad foundational works about slavery in America were published by such historians as Peter Kolchin, Leon Litwack, John Hope Franklin, and Ira Berlin, to name a few. In more recent years, there has been a gradual shift away from broader narratives about slavery to more focused, regional, or site-specific studies. In his book *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (1984), Charles Joyner stressed the need for more specificity. Joyner stated that "historians describe *the* slave community without having probed in depth any *particular* slave community."[1] At about the same time, historic house museums, in the South in particular, began to add "slave tours" to tell the complete histories of their sites. This trend took place at some of the larger historic sites, including the Hermitage, Monticello, and Arlington House, as well as smaller sites throughout the region. But without individual historical and/or archeological research and investigation, many local slave tours were simply generalizations of the main interpretation of slavery in the antebellum South. Casper's goal is to supplant the generalized histories pertaining to African Americans at Mount Vernon. More importantly, Casper's book describes an almost forgotten time in the history of the plantation, a time in which African Americans were the keepers of Washington's memory and helped introduce what is now known as heritage tourism to an American audience.

Casper begins his book not with the life of Mount Vernon's famous owner but with his death. Casper reveals how the probating of Washington's will set the stage for black and white relations at Mount Vernon for the next century. Washington owned 123 slaves at the time of his death and freed them through his will. Martha Washington officially emancipated these slaves on New Years Day, 1801. However, 183 of the slaves on Washington's plantation at the time of his death were "dower" slaves who belonged directly to Martha from her first marriage. These "dower" slaves were therefore not freed in Washington's will and were divided among Martha's four grandchildren. As Washington's heirs took over the estate after Martha's death in 1802, very few of the dower slaves or Washington's freed slaves remained at Mount Vernon. As Casper states, "Over the next sixty years, an entirely new community of African Americans peopled Mount Vernon. This book tells their story" (p. 6).

Casper does an excellent job of marrying the two halves of Mount Vernon's history in the 1800s–the first involving Washington's descendants who struggled to maintain the plantation as an economical, agrarian operation while toying with promoting tourism, and the second beginning with the creation of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association in 1860. Casper meticulously weaves these two generations, not missing any important Washington family detail, across the broader context of American history. Casper shows how the African Americans at Mount Vernon maintained continuity during times of dramatic national change. He successfully explains how Mount Vernon was transformed from the home of George Washington into a national shrine and how "anything associated with Washington, including the grey-haired African Americans who conducted travelers around his

estate, became the object of veneration" (p. 33). As successive heirs to Washington's estate brought new slaves to the plantation before the Civil War, visitors to Mount Vernon always wanted to believe that the African Americans on site *were* Washington's former slaves. White visitors who flocked to the site in the 1800s heard the story of the father of their country from African Americans, some of whom were former slaves and most of whom did not have any direct association with President Washington.

Casper's work is a rich study in the abundant archive of primary sources available for his topic. His research in these sources is ever apparent as he recreates the intricate story of Mount Vernon. Casper always places Mount Vernon's black and white relations in the larger context of the national story from pre-Civil War times through the Jim Crow era. In the 1800s Mount Vernon would be, as Casper calls it, "the American Mecca" and therefore always on a national stage to be critiqued not only by its large visiting audience but also by the national media (p. 18). It was this tourist element that prevented Mount Vernon from operating as a "normal" plantation.

African Americans at Mount Vernon occupied two spheres, one in view of the visiting audience and one out of sight of the visitors. Casper explains how the African Americans at Mount Vernon had direct access, both because of the plantation's location and its visitation, to the latest political news and agendas coming out of Washington DC. "Mount Vernon's African Americans were thoroughly immersed in the same contemporary issues that visitors came to escape: commercial speculation; labor unrest; the conflict over slavery; black people's own quest for equality and opportunity," writes Casper (p. 7). Any "internal" conflicts on the plantation between "master" and "servant" were cast against a larger national agenda. For that reason, Mount Vernon became a symbol of the struggle over slavery and the struggle over equality.

In the book, Casper links every chapter to a person, using such titles as "Oliver Smith's Memories," "Andrew Ford's America," and "Nathan Johnson's Enterprise." All of the chapters somehow relate to Sarah Johnson, a former slave who became a landowner and a key figure in the interpretation of Mount Vernon. Casper juxtaposes the Mount Vernon that visitors saw with the Mount Vernon that was outside of the tour, both physically and figuratively. Sarah Johnson is a case study in herself as a black woman who successfully made the transition from slavery to freedom and was revered by the members of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association. Although she was born forty-five years after the death of President Washington, Johnson's work and interactions at the mansion chronicled the saving and memorializing of Washington's home place.

This book tends to follow the same path as similar African American studies that marry genealogical methodologies with more traditional historical research, like Edward Ball's *Slaves in the Family* (1998) and *Somerset Homecoming: Recovering a Lost Heritage* (1988), by Dorothy Spruill Redford. Both Ball and Redford challenge their readers to make family connections amid a sea of names. Casper does not attempt to mention every African American who lived and labored at Mount Vernon and even includes a small family tree at the beginning of the book to assist the reader. As each chapter ends, Casper reaffirms the communal ties between key characters before introducing the next chapter.

African Americans at Mount Vernon set the stage for heritage tourism. As early as the 1850s, African Americans led tours of the mansion and grounds, offered interpretations of Washington's life, and even sold meals and souvenirs. However, the death of Sarah Johnson in 1929 marked the end of this era and from that time through the late 1900s, the African American element of historic interpretation at Mount Vernon all but vanished. In the last chapter of the book, Casper brings a contemporary public history element to his more traditional study. He is quick to note that Mount Vernon today offers a "Slave Life Tour," which encourages visitors to imagine the grounds from the perspective of African American laborers. However, like similar historic sites with an enslaved past, Mount Vernon still tends to divide its interpretive black and white histories into separate tours or celebrations, instead of presenting the intertwined complexity that truly describes race relations in American history. Scott Casper wrote *Sarah Johnson's Mount Vernon: The Forgotten History of an American Shrine* to fill the void left in the interpretation presented at this premier historic site. This book represents a memorial to those African Americans who helped keep the story of President Washington alive and paved the way for contemporary tourism at this national shrine.

Note

[1]. Charles W. Joyner, *Down By the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), xvi.

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