

George Washington's Farm Reports, 1789-1798

Transcribing George Washington's Farm Reports:

Between 1786 and his death in 1799, George Washington had the farm managers he entrusted with the supervision of his five farms at Mount Vernon send him weekly reports. About 235 of these reports (including a group from 1785 that Washington wrote himself) survive. While a few of the farm reports appear in the modern [published edition](#) of Washington's papers, most are unpublished (although the letters that accompanied them are). Approximately fifty farm reports, both whole and fragmentary, are part of the [George Washington Papers](#) at the Library of Congress; the rest are at other libraries, including the Washington Library at Mount Vernon.

In 2021 Joseph Mitchell, an intern with the Library's Archives, History and Heritage Advanced Internship Program, identified the unpublished farm reports in the George Washington Papers at the Library and prepared them for crowdsourcing by the Library's "[By the People](#)" project.

Volunteer transcribers for "By the People" will make these farm reports easily readable and searchable for the first time.

Washington's farm reports are an important source of information about the agriculture and industries at Mount Vernon, and his implementation of new, chiefly British, ideas about farming. However, it was the people enslaved at Mount Vernon who carried out most of this work. The reports are, perhaps most significantly, a rare record of their lives and labor.

Understanding George Washington's Farm Reports:

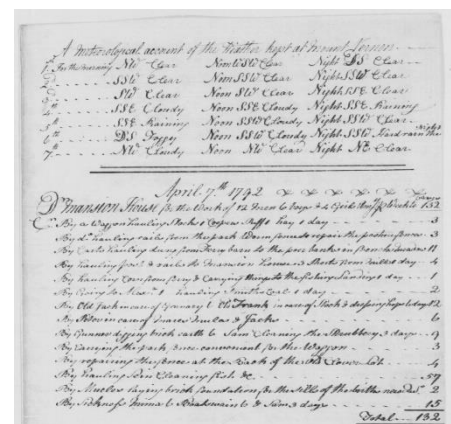
Most of the farm reports in the George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress date from the period when Washington was president of the United States (1789-1797) and living most of

the time in New York and Philadelphia. The managers who reported to him during these years were: his nephew George Augustine Washington, 1786-1790; Anthony Whiting, or Whitting, 1790-1793; another nephew, Howell Lewis, 1793-1794; William Pearce, 1794-1796; and James Anderson, 1796-1802.

Before 1786, when Washington instituted a systematic method of reporting, his farms were managed for him by his cousin, Lund Washington. Lund worked for Washington for more than twenty years, a period that included the Revolutionary War. His reports to Washington took the form of letters. These are in his papers, and they were published along with the rest of Washington's correspondence. By 1786, when George Augustine Washington arrived to take over from Lund, George Washington had devised a structure for the farm reports that all subsequent farm managers would use (and which was part of the reason why they weren't published: in the era before digital databases, the editors of the Papers of George Washington at the University of Virginia found their tabular structure challenging.)

According to the structure dictated by George Washington, each report begins with a daily weather record. Following the weather record is an accounting of labor at each of the farms: Mansion House, Dogue Run, River Farm, Muddy Hole, and Ferry and French's ("French's" was named after his neighbor Penelope French, who rented him the land and the slaves who lived there. Washington combined French's Farm with Ferry Farm and in 1793 named the combined land Union Farm).

The reports include counts of livestock, tables reporting the output of the grist mill, and lists and tables showing the work of brickmakers, joiners (cabinetmakers) and carpenters, coopers (barrel makers), ditchers, gardeners, and spinners and knitters. Some of these



This is an example of one of the reports, from the week of April 7, 1792.
<https://www.loc.gov/item/maw437456/>

lists and tables are separate from the reports, and may be fragments of reports that no longer exist.

Each report includes lists, by farm, of enslaved workers who lost time at work due to sickness. Childbirths are listed here. Some reports mention journeys people took off the farms, to nearby Alexandria and elsewhere. Washington's enslaved workers, men, women, and children, are listed by name throughout the reports, making what Washington intended as an accounting of labor at his farms into a valuable, if limited, record of the lives of the people at Mount Vernon.

The farm managers, at Washington's direction, headed pages of their reports with Dr (for debtor) and Cr (for creditor). Washington borrowed these terms from the double-entry bookkeeping that he used in his financial records (see [Series 5](#) in the George Washington Papers). His farm reports, however, were different from his ledger books, since they dealt with time—hours of work—rather than money, and the only parties to these transactions were Washington and the people who worked for him, including those whose labor he owned. This appears to have been a unique practice, and it is not entirely certain what Washington meant by it—except that in this period he was trying to systematize his farming operations.

This set of farm reports dates from the period when Washington, like other Virginia planters, had moved away from tobacco as a staple crop toward a more diverse agriculture. These reports show cultivation and processing of grain, including wheat, corn, rye, and oats; fibers for textiles, including flax and hemp; fishing, distilling, and cultivation of potatoes and turnips. Workers hauled wood and rails, grubbed, plowed, and cleared fields; dug ditches, made fences, made and fixed farm implements, cared for livestock, made bricks, and repaired buildings. A few traveled into nearby Alexandria on Washington's errands.

Washington's farm reports were created by his managers for him for what they believed were pragmatic reasons—today the reports have more to tell us than they could ever have imagined.

To be part of the crowdsourcing project, go to <https://crowd.loc.gov/> and help bring these eighteenth-century papers into the twenty-first century.

Julie Miller, Historian, Early America, Manuscript Division
Joseph Mitchell, Intern, Archives, History and Heritage Advanced Internship Program, Fall, 2021

Read More About it:

“Farm Reports—Editorial Note,” *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008. Online at Founders Online: <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-03-02-0347>

“Washington and the New Agriculture,” in: *Diaries of George Washington*, Volume 1, xxv – xxxvii. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/george-washington-papers/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-diaries-of-george-washington/washington-and-the-new-agriculture/>

Bruce Ragsdale. *Washington at the Plow: The Founding Farmer and the Question of Slavery*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2021.

Caitlin Rosenthal. *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.

Brenda E. Stevenson. *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Thompson, Mary V. “*The only unavoidable subject of regret*”: *George Washington, Slavery, and the Enslaved Community at Mount Vernon*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019.