

"I Rid to My Plantations": The Rural Pursuits
of Washington and Jefferson

by

David Edward Bell

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James P. Ronda August 6, 1990
Advisor Date

Frederick Blue Aug. 7, 1990
Advisor Date

Sally M. Hotchkiss August 9, 1990
Dean of the Graduate School Date

Youngstown State University

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For my mother,

Mary C. Bell,

and her commitment to the past.

ABSTRACT

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George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were drawn into the controversy of the American Revolution and into the new American government from the very top of Virginia plantation society. Both men came to planting with some measure of reluctance. Washington, discouraged in his efforts to join the regular British Army, turned to the plow as an alternative means of gaining social prominence and financial security. While his initial years of farming were troubled ones, Washington quickly adapted to the life of the planter and became a major presence in northeastern Virginia. His diligence, patience, and sound business skills permitted him to ease his burden of debt to British merchants, expand the boundaries of Mount Vernon, properly care for his slaves, and provide a comfortable life for his family.

Upon his retirement to Monticello in 1809, Thomas Jefferson took up farming for essentially the first time in his life.

called away by public service for the vast majority of his life, Jefferson had directed his plantations by written instructions to his overseers and superintendents. Jefferson's seventeen years at Monticello mark the darkest period in his life. The limitations of his lands, years of inclement weather, and the irregular economic conditions of the period made the profitability of his plantations a remote possibility. When taken in conjunction with his limited managerial skills and heavy indebtedness, economic stability for Jefferson became even more elusive. Despite his economic difficulties, he continued to build houses of fantastic size, care for his bonded black laborers, and contribute his money and time to projects such as the construction of the University of Virginia. The picture of Jefferson that emerges is one of a man uncomfortable with the business of farm management and entirely uneasy in matters of finance.

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Projects of this size and scope cannot be started, much less completed, without the assistance of many dedicated and caring people. The idea for a study of the agricultural lives of Washington and Jefferson originated with the late Donald Jackson, one of America's most distinguished historians. I only hope that he would approve of what is between these covers. Warm thanks to those hearty souls who staff the Maag Library Reference Room, especially Hildegard Schnuttgen and Debra Beronja. Their efforts in locating titles long out-of-print is most appreciated. My gratitude also goes to Dr. Frederick Blue, Department of History, for his patience and commitment to scholarship and stylistic quality. For his dedication to this project and confidence in its author, I am particularly grateful to Dr. James P. Ronda. His high standards and critical eye were a source of boundless inspiration. Finally, and most importantly, I extend my sincere gratitude to my family. They stood by me as I walked through Washington's wheat fields and peered into Jefferson's shops. I am particularly grateful to my father, Edward Bell, for his patience in explaining growing seasons, the use of farm implements, and cultivation of crops. His roots in the soil kept me from straying from the path.

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INTRODUCTION

Biographers have searched for the past two hundred years to uncover new sources and information on the lives of two of America's most dynamic and compelling figures, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. In their efforts to understand the ideas and ideals of these two men, scholars have focused their studies on documents related primarily to their public careers.

Washington's presidential correspondence and military directives to his subordinates and Jefferson's political discourses and diplomatic dispatches from France have been scrutinized again and again by those hoping to add a new interpretation to the historiography of early America. Until recently, however, students of the period have largely ignored the plantation lives of Washington and Jefferson as a source of historical insight.

The prevailing image many have of Washington during the years prior to his acceptance of the position of commander-in-chief of the American Continental Army is one which defines him simply as a surveyor or frontier warrior. While these experiences were central to defining Washington's character and overall outlook, his construction of his Mount Vernon plantation along the Potomac River is of considerable importance as well. Similarly, Thomas Jefferson's years of retirement would be equally misunderstood if they were only to be seen in light of his involvement in the construction of the University of Virginia

or of his completion of the great house at Monticello. Washington, at the beginning of his life as a farmer, and Jefferson, at the conclusion of his years tending the soil, illustrate better than any political study, their complexities, strengths, and weaknesses.

Much about any plantation owner can be understood by looking at the manner in which he operated his farms and shops. It says a good deal about their integrity, practicality, and commitment to economic growth. A master's attitude about slavery can be far better understood by determining how well his bondsmen were fed and clothed than by analyzing any political treatise he might have written. Their powers of communication, skill in judging character, and the manner in which they dealt with financial matters become very clear by even a cursory study of their farm diaries and correspondence.

Aside from gaining insight into the values and attitudes of Washington and Jefferson, the analysis of their farms brings about one additional benefit. Their estates epitomize the best and worst aspects of the eighteenth and nineteenth century planting. They depict the great wealth and prestige that accompanied successful plantation management. They also reveal the destructive power of bad harvests, bad investments, and bad judgement on the financial security of a Virginia planter.

Chapter I

Washington of Mount Vernon
(1754-1775)

"The life of a Husbandman of all others is the most delectable. It is honorable. It is amusing, and with judicious management, it is profitable."

George Washington to Alexander
Spotswood, February 13, 1788

I

Efficiency, leadership, and organization are the hallmarks of not only military leaders but plantation owners as well. The management of estates covering thousands of acres and staffed by sometimes hundreds of slave laborers required substantial skill and determination. George Washington's first display of these characteristics did not occur during the 1775 defense of Boston, nor did it initially appear during his tenure as the first American President. While glimmers of his leadership and organizational skills were revealed during his involvement in the Great War for Empire, it was the sixteen-year period between his departure from military service and return to Mount Vernon in 1759, and his departure for the battlefield in 1775 as Commander-in-Chief of the American Continental Army that these talents and abilities became fully developed. Lacking any substantial inheritance, the road to social and economic prominence for Washington largely depended upon his ability to capably manage his plantation and its many associated industries.

Through much of the 1740s and 1750s, George Washington's primary inclinations in life had been not towards plowing and plantations but were "strongly bent to arms."¹ By the time

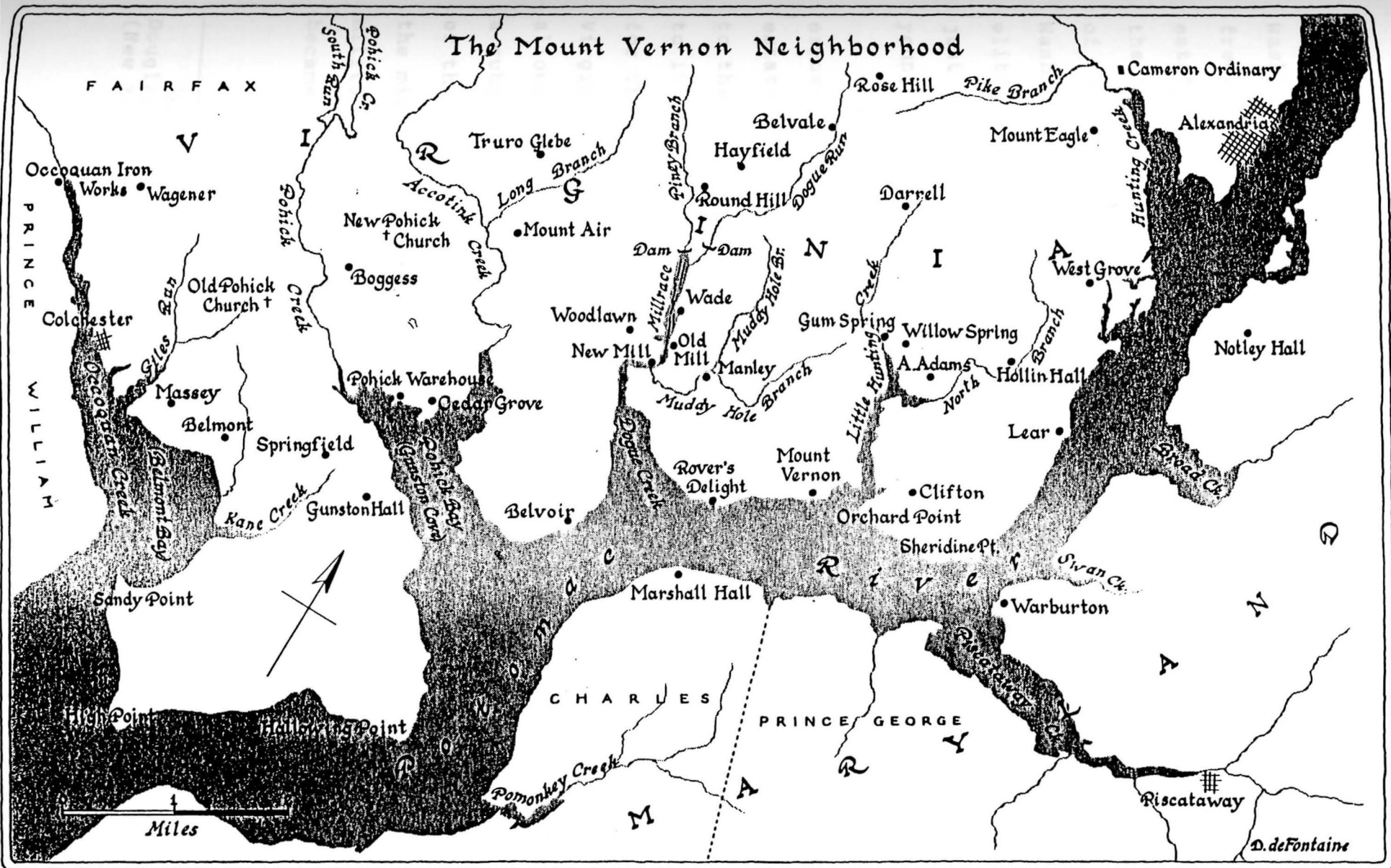
¹George Washington to Colonel William Fitzhugh, 15 November 1754, The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, 39 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931-1944), 1: 107. Hereafter referred to as Fitzpatrick, ed., WGW.

Washington was twenty-seven years old he had made four trips into the Ohio country on behalf of king and country. He had risen to the rank of colonel in the Virginia militia and had spent several hard years on the Virginia frontier as commander of its defenses against Indian attack. Yet by late 1759, Washington appeared more than ready to settle into a quiet agricultural life

In his view, the army, despite all of its lustre and glory, would never fully accept him or his troops into its ranks. Time and time again, Washington and his Virginia provincials had been rebuffed by their counterparts in the British regulars. The unwillingness of the British authorities to incorporate the Virginia Regiment into the regular army, the blistering attack on Washington administered by John Campbell, Earl of Loudoun, the commander-in-chief of British forces in America, when the former pled for a royal commission, and the hollow 1758 victory of General Forbes at Fort Duquesne in which Washington took part (the fort had been abandoned and burned by the French) all served to promote the Virginian's disillusionment with the military.²

Washington, nevertheless, was no stranger to pastoral life. Augustine Washington, George's father, reared his family on farms and plantations throughout eastern Virginia. With Augustine's death in April 1743, George received title to Ferry Farm, the

²John E. Ferling, The First of Men: A Life of George Washington (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1988), p.48; James Thomas Flexner, Washington, The Indispensable Man (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), pp.18, 34-35.



The Mount Vernon Neighborhood

Washington estate along Virginia's Rappahannock River. Making frequent trips to visit his older, half-brother Lawrence at his estate along the Potomac River, recently renamed Mount Vernon by the elder Washington in honor of Admiral Edward Vernon, commander of the Cartagena expedition launched during King George's War, Washington was introduced to life among the Virginia planter elite. His friendships with the well-to-do Fairfaxes of Belvoir, just across Dogue Creek from Mount Vernon, further revealed to young Washington the trappings of life among the aristocracy.³

Washington's forays into the Virginia frontier not only exposed him to some of the colony's most choice sections of real estate, but also provided him with the working capital necessary to the purchase of land and the slaves and implements essential to its successful cultivation. The wages earned from surveying for Thomas Lord Fairfax, proprietor of a substantial section of Virginia, and his later position as surveyor for Culpeper County allowed Washington to purchase several tracts of land, including a substantial plot along Bullskin Creek in the northern portion of the colony. Washington established a farm on these lands in the mid-1750s and continued to oversee its operation in spite of military service and distance. It remained important to him, yet became considerably less so after he began his tenure as master

³Ferling, First of Men, p.64; Flexner, Indispensable, p.6; Douglas Southall Freeman, George Washington: A Biography, 7 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948-1957), 1: 72,74.

of Mount Vernon in late 1754.⁴

Early in his thirties, Lawrence Washington was stricken with a persistent cough most now believe was symptomatic of acute tuberculosis. After traveling to Barbados in the company of George in 1751 in the hope that its tropical climate might have some medicinal effect, Lawrence died in July 1752. The hastily-drafted will stipulated that all of his estate, with some exceptions, would pass to his infant daughter, Sarah. Lawrence's wife, Ann Fairfax Washington, was to retain half of his slaves as well as life interest in Mount Vernon and some of his other lands. George's portion of his brother's estate included a number of slaves, three lots in Fredericksburg, and title to Mount Vernon and Lawrence's other Fairfax county lands in the event of his daughter's death. Sarah Washington died within the year. In December 1754 Anne and her new husband George Lee signed over her life interest in the 2,300-acre Mount Vernon plot to her brother-in-law George in exchange for an annual payment of fifteen thousand pounds of tobacco. Anne's death in July 1761 secured for Washington a free and clear title to the house, gristmill, lands, and slaves.⁵

⁴Ferling, First of Men, pp.13-14.

⁵Lease of Mount Vernon, 15 December 1754, W.W. Abbot, ed., The Papers of George Washington, Colonial Series, 6 vols., (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983-), 1: 232-234, Hereafter referred to as Abbot, PGW; Flexner, Indispensable, p.8; Freeman, Washington, 1: 247-248, 264; Elswyth Thane, Potomac Squire (Mount Vernon: Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, 1963), pp. 9, 75.

Despite the considerable rental payment that Washington was compelled each year to make, through much of the 1750s, distance and other responsibilities severely limited the amount of time he could devote to his farms. The expeditions mounted by British and colonial troops into the Ohio Country as well as his posting to the forts along the Virginia frontier for the protection of the colony posed sizable obstacles to efficient management of Washington's farming operations. From his billet at Fort Loudoun in Winchester, Washington wrote Richard Washington, a London merchant he believed was somehow distantly related to him, that he was "so little acquainted with the Business relative to [his] private Affairs that [he] could scarce give [him] any information concerning it."⁶ Details ranging from the clothing of his "people" to the marketing of his tobacco required Washington's attention. While in residence at Mount Vernon, Washington was forced to manage his Bullskin plantation in Frederick County through letters and sporadic visits. He also engaged Lieutenant Charles Smith, commander of the fortifications and militia detachment at Fort Loudoun, to supervise the operations at the Bullskin farm.⁷

While planting progressed both at Bullskin and at Mount Vernon, the enlargement and remodeling of the "great house" at

⁶George Washington to Richard Washington, 15 April 1757, Abbot, ed., PGW, 5: 133.

⁷Abbot, ed., PGW, 5: 253n.

the Potomac River estate took center stage. Stationed on the frontier during a significant portion of the mansion's renovation, Washington was forced to "oversee" the construction through letters. Lacking any substantial architectural background, Washington hired a house joiner, John Patterson, to superintend the remodeling work. It appears that Washington's choice was a good one, for Patterson took great pride in his work and constantly reassured Washington of his commitment and diligence. The primary job falling upon Patterson was to add an additional story to the one-and-a-half story dwelling George had inherited from his brother Lawrence. This meant not only substantial work to the exterior of the house, but extensive reconstruction on the inside including an additional staircase, plastering, and paneling.⁸

Wash: By mid-June 1758, Washington's slave carpenters had most of the new portion of the house framed. Washington's long-time friend, George William Fairfax, made frequent stops at Mount Vernon to lend guidance and give suggestions on the construction. He wrote Washington at Fort Cumberland in late-July 1758 that the roof had been raised and would soon be covered barring any delay in the delivery of shingles. Humphrey Knight, Washington's Mount Vernon overseer, communicated to Washington in August that "the great house goes on as brisk as Possible," with the painters and

Abbot
PWA
Wash: ⁸John Patterson to George Washington, 17 June 1758, Abbot, ed., PGW, 5: 218-19n, 222; Ferling, First of Men, p.64.

the carpenters finishing much of the work to the exterior of the building. Fairfax, however, stated in early September that despite all of his efforts and those of Patterson, he began to doubt that the house could be completed in the foreseeable future. The building materials that Washington had ordered the previous year from England, including glass for the windows, a chimney piece, wallpaper, and hardware for the doors and windows, had not yet arrived at the building site. When Washington returned to Mount Vernon in April 1759, in the company of his new bride, Martha Custis Washington, the great house had only just been completed.⁹

Once Washington took up permanent residence at Mount Vernon, he settled into daily routine similar to that of many Virginia planters. Frequently, especially during the winter months, Washington and perhaps a neighbor or two would gather their hounds and take to their horses in search of the elusive fox or duck. The absence of thick foliage brought about by winter cold and snow also facilitated Washington's efforts to survey new properties that he had purchased. Foul weather often brought Washington indoors to attend to correspondence. In the field, among his "people," however, was where Washington was most likely

⁹George Washington to Richard Washington, 15 April 1757, Abbot, ed., *PGW*, 4: 134; John Patterson to George Washington, 17 June 1758, *Ibid.*, 5: 222; George William Fairfax to George Washington, 23 July 1758, *Ibid.*, 5: 328; Humphrey Knight to George Washington, 24 August 1758, *Ibid.*, 5: 418; George William Fairfax to George Washington, 1 September 1758, *Ibid.*, 5: 436.

to be found on any day, regardless of season. One day in late January 1772, Washington rode to his mill in snow that was "up to the breast of a Tall Horse." Generally, he rose a 4:00 a.m., devoted two hours to correspondence and financial matters, breakfasted, and by 7:00 a.m. was in the saddle to begin his fifteen-mile ride around his plantations. He would very often personally oversee his workers as they cleared parcels of land, planted or harvested the crops, or constructed new roads. Washington's diaries are great testament to his diligence and commitment to the successful operation of the farms.¹⁰

In addition to Washington's participatory style of management, the plantation overseer played a critical role in the cultivation of the crops and the management of the slave labor force at Mount Vernon. Perhaps nowhere else is the character of the plantation owner more clearly revealed than in the selection of his overseers. They reveal the owner's attitudes about his farms, his demeanor when it came to his slaves and indentured servants, and his commitment to profitability. The contracts and correspondence between Washington and his overseers indicate that the master of Mount Vernon presented a particularly fine example of this theory's validity.

In May 1762, Washington hired Burgess Mitchell to work at

¹⁰ Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig, eds, The Diaries of George Washington, 6 vols., (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976-79), 2: 37, 39, 69, 133, 279, 297; Ibid., 3: 40, 83. Hereafter referred to as Jackson and Twohig, eds., DGW.; Ferling, First of Men, p.67.

the Mount Vernon "Home plantation" as its overseer. The terms of the agreement stated that Mitchell was bound, under penalty of dismissal and, in cases of "failure or neglect," being terminated without payment of his wages, to several specific directives. First, and certainly foremost, Mitchell was to follow the directions given by Washington with "the greatest care Expedition and exactness." Washington's military background demanded a chain of command that was strictly and absolutely observed. He simply would not stand for procrastination or deviation from his instructions. The agreement also specified that Mitchell was, with the exception of mealtimes, to remain with the workers in the fields and in their shops throughout the work day. When Washington negotiated the agreement for the position of overseer at the Bullskin plantation, he required the new superintendent to take great care of the estate's slave laborers, "using them with proper humanity and discretion." Mitchell bound himself to remain on the plantation at all times, leaving only after gaining permission, and "to behave himself soberly, and diligently in all respects." Here too, Washington's experience in the Virginia Militia no doubt had a substantial impact upon his attitudes on the effects of strong drink on a man's effectiveness and morale.¹¹

¹¹ Overseer on the Home Plantation, 1 May 1762, Worthington C. Ford, ed., Washington as an Employer and Importer of Labor, (Brooklyn, 1889; repr., New York: Burt Franklin, 1971.), 27; Overseer for an Outlying Plantation, 15 August 1762, Ibid., 29.

There is no question that Washington, whether on the frontier or in residence at Mount Vernon, exerted considerable pressure and influence on his overseers. The letters from the superintendents at Bullskin and Mount Vernon reflect a real concern on the part of Washington's administrators that he not think they were acting in a careless or delinquent manner. Humphrey Knight at Mount Vernon wrote Washington while he was stationed at Fort Loudoun that he understood that a number of the letters written by the overseer had failed to reach him. Apologizing for the miscarriage, Knight promised to "write the oftener for the futer [future]." Yet there is an even more pervasive presence that can be perceived from the correspondence between Washington and his overseers. Men like Knight and Christopher Hardwick at Bullskin seem to be eternally reassuring Washington of their attentiveness to and concern for his affairs. Assuring him that he would be "cairful and Dilligent" in Washington's business, Knight vowed to "render a Just Acct [account]" of his financial affairs. Despite his initial protracted absences from the farms, it is clear that Washington did a fine job in impressing upon his overseers the necessity of organization, obedience, and order throughout his estate.¹²

Of course the major task assigned to the plantation overseers stood largely in the administration and supervision of

¹²Humphrey Knight to George Washington, 13 July 1758, Abbot, ed., PGW, 5: 274; Humphrey Knight to George Washington, 2 September 1758, Ibid., 5: 447.

the estate's slave labor force. While Washington is noted for his later views on the evils of Negro servitude and the eventual emancipation of his slaves upon his death, his outlook on slavery during the 1750s, 1760s and 1770s is very much like that of any other large plantation owner. John R. Alden, a major Washington biographer, is quick to point out that while life at Mount Vernon was "idyllic" for the Washingtons and their guests, it was something much less than that for "the many scores of slaves who toiled" in his fields and shops. The prevailing belief among slave holders from New England to the West Indies was that bonded black men and women were more a piece of property, like a wagon or a silver spoon, and something less of a human being. This must of course be qualified and tempered by the notion that the treatment of unfree black laborers varied as greatly within the colonies as it did within the single colony of Virginia. For slaves at Mount Vernon, it is apparent that while life could have certainly been better, the experiences of black laborers at other estates indicate that it could have been considerably more unpleasant.¹³

By all accounts, Washington employed his slaves in the fashion he believed was the most efficient. He deplored waste in any form, particular wasted time or effort. While camped at George's Creek in June 1755, during General Edward Braddock's

¹³John R. Alden, George Washington, A Biography, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1987), p.218.

offensive into the Ohio country, Washington wrote his younger brother John Augustine, who was managing Mount Vernon in his absence, that he was to "employ Cleo's leisure hour's in making" clothes for the other plantation laborers. Lieutenant Smith saw to it that in light of the poor crop that appeared to be in progress at Bullskin that the negro laborers be set to work cutting wood for the ironworks near the plantation.¹⁴

The tax list submitted by Washington in May 1760 to Fairfax County, of which Mount Vernon was a substantial part, indicated that he had some forty-three slaves in residence at the plantation. Slaves served normally in one of three different capacities. Nine of the slaves at Mount Vernon worked as house servants. Members of this group were involved largely in the operation of the household, performing duties such as cleaning, cooking, serving, assisting with the children, and attending to the coach and horses of the Washingtons. Like household servants of other plantations, these servants received the best food and clothes and were in the most contact with the plantation owners. Nine slaves at Mount Vernon formed the second group: craftsmen and artisans. Much of the construction work done at Mount Vernon was done by Washington's seven slave carpenters. Their duties ranged from building and repairing tobacco barns to the construction of a schooner for fishing on the Potomac River. Two

¹⁴George Washington to John Augustine Washington, 14 June 1755, Fitzpatrick, ed., WGW, 1: 140; Lieutenant Charles Smith to George Washington, 27 August 1758, Abbot, ed., PGW, 5: 423.

slave blacksmiths shod the plantation's horses, mended various pieces of hardware, and worked with Washington to develop new plows. The remaining slaves were those who were "in the ground." The field laborers of Washington's Home, Muddy Hole, Dogue Run, and Williamson Plantations planted and cared for the tobacco plantings, wheat, corn, and livestock of the estate. During the harvest seasons, servants from the house as well as the plantation's craftsmen were pressed into service. These were the hands on whom Washington depended for his survival and that of his "people."¹⁵

Life at Mount Vernon for Washington's black labor force remains, to this day, largely a mystery. Neither Washington nor his workers left many records on which to reconstruct the conditions in existence at the plantation, especially during the early period of his tenure at Mount Vernon. What is clear, however, is that while a full day's work was required of all at his plantations, Washington's slaves did not want for food, shelter, or medical attention. A wave of sickness, including an outbreak of measles, spread through the slave cabins in the first weeks of 1760. On January 28, while visiting his farms, Washington came upon Cupid, a male Custis slave obtained by Washington through his recent marriage. Noting his ill health, attributed to the effects of pleurisy, Washington ordered that he

¹⁵Memorandum, List of Tithables, May 1760, Abbot, ed., PGW, 6: 428; For additional information see Jackson and Twohig, eds., DGW, vols. 1-3.

be "brot. home in a Cart for the better care of him." In addition to administering his own treatment, such as bleeding, to his slaves, Washington retained the services of Dr. James Laurie of Alexandria at the annual rate of fifteen pounds to administer medical services to the sick of his plantation. Though Washington certainly recognized some degree of humanitarian duty in properly caring for his slaves, seeing to it that they were well taken care of made good financial sense to him.¹⁶

While the quality of life for the slaves at Mount Vernon is somewhat clouded, the means with which Washington dealt with the more sordid sides of slavery, that of buying and selling slaves as well as enforcing discipline, are more clearly understood. In 1759, Washington spent six hundred pounds for the purchase of thirteen slaves, and by 1772, he had more than tripled that initial investment in human capital. During that latter year, Washington sent a load of his "Superfine" flour to the West Indies to secure funds for the purchase there of additional slave labor. He specified that two-thirds of the slaves be males "not exceeding (at any rate) 20 y'rs of age" and the remainder be females no older than sixteen. While he was conscious of the value of young male field hands, his willingness to purchase additional female slaves indicates that he also appreciated the value of naturally increasing the size of his slave labor

¹⁶Jackson and Twohig, eds., DGW, 1: 230; Thane, Potomac Squire, 57.

force.¹⁷

If the purchase of slaves served to rectify the shortage of labor at Mount Vernon, so too did the auction block serve as a means of dealing with rebellious and unruly bondsmen. Rather than resort to the frequent use of the lash, Washington was more disposed to sell those slaves who could not be used effectively at Mount Vernon or had a penchant for escape. In July 1766, Captain Josiah Thompson, commander of the schooner Swift, took possession of Tom, a Negro slave Washington referred to as "both a Rogue and a Runaway." Washington asked the vessel's captain, engaged in trade in the West Indies, that he dispose of Tom for any price he could. He advised Thompson, however, that he "keep him handcuffed till [he got] to Sea or in the Bay" so as to prevent his further attempts at escape.¹⁸

When Washington "quit a Military Life," and settled into Mount Vernon in early 1759, he was taking a substantial risk. While the comforts of the estate were no doubt a welcome change from the strains of life on the frontier, Mount Vernon was in complete disarray. Converting the plantation into a smoothly running and profitable enterprise would be no simple task, for Washington had spent most of the years of his young life in the

¹⁷George Washington to Daniel Jenifer Adams, 20 July 1772, Fitzpatrick, ed., WGW, 3: 98; Ferling, First of Men, pp.67-68.

¹⁸George Washington to Captain Josiah Thompson, 2 July 1766, Fitzpatrick, ed., WGW, 2: 437, 437n.

capacity of surveyor-soldier, not expressing the remotest of interests in affairs of the soil. Resolving to set aside his sword and take up the lucrative but risky business of farming, Washington began the process of educating himself in the most effective and productive methods of agriculture. In several of his 1759 letters to Robert Cary and Company, a London merchant concern, Washington requested that the firm send along, in addition to a set of dessert glasses and an assortment of grass seed, "the newest, and most approved Treatise of Agriculture." It is clear that Washington understood his shortcomings and was not willing to gamble his estate on ignorance.¹⁹

Washington was above all other things a practical man. While he appreciated the value of books and theory, he appeared to be the most comfortable with the time-honored method of trial and error. His diaries are a testament to his passion for agricultural experimentation. Washington tested the growth of various types of seeds, "to try [their] goodness," and developed new plows. Undoubtedly, however, Washington's principal and lifelong interest in horticultural investigation lay with the search for a means of revitalizing the exhausted lands of Mount Vernon. Years of intensive tobacco growing had depleted many of the nutrients essential to successful growth. Washington

¹⁹George Washington to Robert Cary and Company, 1 May 1759, Abbot, ed., PGW, 6: 317; George Washington to Richard Washington, 7 May 1759, Ibid., 6: 319; George Washington to Robert Stewart, 27 April 1763, Fitzpatrick, ed., WGW, 2: 397.

instituted a system of crop rotation and tested various types of fertilizers. Later in his life, frustrated with the deficiencies of his lands, he remarked that the ideal farmer was one who could "Midas like ... convert everything he touches into manure, as the first transmutation towards gold."²⁰

Tobacco is, by its very nature, a highly extractive plant. An English contemporary touring the colonies, paying particular attention to provincial agriculture, noted that there was "no plant in the world which requires richer land, or more manure than tobacco."²¹ Successfully growing, harvesting, and shipping the leaf was also a very difficult and risky venture, for any mistake in timing meant the partial or complete destruction of the crop and possible financial ruin. Tobacco planting was certainly not for the faint of heart. But for those willing to make the effort and take the risks, its cultivation could lead to fabulous wealth. Washington, at least early in his farming career, was more than willing to take those chances.

Growing and shipping tobacco was a process which consumed the better part of a year. The small size and fragility of the tobacco seed meant that the seeds had first to be raised into plantings before being transported into the fields. Normally in

²⁰Jackson and Twohig, eds., DGW, 1: 250, 263; George Washington to George William Fairfax, 30 June 1785, Fitzpatrick, ed., WGW, 28: 185-186.

²¹Harry J. Carman, ed, American Husbandry, (1775; repr., Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1939), p.164.

March or April, the tiny seeds, of which ten thousand could be held in a single teaspoon, would be planted in a bed of rich earth, which had usually been fortified by the ashes of burned brush and trees. Once the plantings had reached a height of four or five inches, usually by May or early June, they were transplanted into hillocks in the field, normally from three to nine feet apart. By early July the plants were roughly a foot high and were ready to be "topped." This process removed the top leaves of each tobacco plant, leaving only five to nine leaves. Done only by the master or an experienced slave, this action prevented the loss of the plant's vital nutrients to a flower. Throughout the following six weeks, the plants were periodically checked for "suckers," useless shoots that sapped the plant's strength. These procedures were accompanied by the constant hoeing, weeding, and worming of the tobacco hillocks. Were either weeds or the much despised tobacco worms to overtake the tobacco plants, the eventual destruction of the crop became highly probable.²²

By September, the tobacco plants were ready to be harvested. Properly timing when the tobacco was to be cut was essential. Once the tobacco was mature, the leaves thickened and became spotted and brown. To gather the plants too early could mean

²²Carman, American Husbandry, pp.159-160; Arthur Pierce Middleton, Tobacco Coast: A Maritime History of the Chesapeake Bay in the Colonial Era, (Newport News, Va: The Mariners' Museum, 1953; repr., Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp.111-112.

harvesting a crop that was not yet fully ripe. To wait too long, as Washington did in 1763, was to put the tobacco at risk of damage by frost. After it was cut it was placed in the fields in heaps for one night to allow it to "sweat". The following day, the plantation laborers carried the plants in bunches to the tobacco houses where they were hung individually from the rafters. For the following four to five weeks the plants dried in the barns which were designed to prevent damage by rain while at the same time allowing the maximum amount of air circulation. Once this process was completed, the planter was once again forced to make a decision. To allow additional drying time meant that the leaves could become too parched and might disintegrate during the voyage to Britain. Removing the plants from the barns too soon might leave excessive moisture in the leaves causing them to rot in their hogsheads. Once the planter judged the leaves ready, they were once again laid in heaps and allowed to "sweat" for an additional one to two weeks. The plants were then collected and packed into hogsheads each weighing between 950 and 1,400 pounds. Pulled by horses or oxen to the local inspection station, the hogsheads were then examined and graded; Washington's leaf was generally inspected at the Fairfax County warehouse. The hogsheads of Mount Vernon tobacco were then either loaded aboard ships for passage to Britain, or were sold

within the colony.²³

The demanding process of tobacco growing was made more difficult for Washington by the exhausted land of Mount Vernon. His absence from the estate during much of the 1750s made the potential for profitability even more remote. Writing from Fort Loudoun in September 1757, Washington informed his factor, Anthony Bacon & Company, that he was shipping eighteen hogsheads of his 1756 tobacco crop from Virginia. This probably included leaf from both the Bullskin and Mount Vernon farms. That year Washington elected, due to the high cost of insurance, to split his crop among several "bottoms" (vessels) without any protection from loss or damage. Ten of the eighteen hogsheads were loaded aboard the Integrity, and eight were loaded into the hold of the Endeavor. During the passage to Britain, the Integrity and Washington's tobacco were lost at sea. Despite initial optimism, Washington's crops of tobacco in both 1757 and 1758 were quite poor. The drought which came over Virginia in the latter year baked the fragile tobacco plantings at both Bullskin and Mount Vernon. These unfortunate incidents were just the beginning of Washington's difficulties with tobacco.²⁴

²³Jackson and Twohig, eds., DGW, 1: 314; Carman, American Husbandry, pp.160-161; Ferling, First of Men, p.65; Middleton, Tobacco Coast, pp.112-113.

²⁴George Washington to Anthony Bacon and Company, 10 September 1757, Abbot, ed., PGW, 4: 400, 401n; George Washington to Richard Washington, 10 September 1757, Ibid., 4: 401-402; Christopher Hardwick to George Washington, 3 September 1758, Ibid., 5: 451; Humphrey Knight to George Washington, 16 June 1758, Ibid., 5: 217; George Washington to Richard Washington, 7 May 1759, 6: 319.

Despite these setbacks, Washington began a new crop of tobacco in the spring of 1759. It appears that the Virginian's tobacco fared better that year, as it did in 1760 and 1761. With more time at his disposal, Washington investigated which types of tobacco brought the highest rate and which methods of cultivation and processing increased the value of his leaf. Always anxious "to pursue and follow that method which promises the most certain advantages," Washington made in-depth inquiries into the benefits and drawbacks of stemming his tobacco. He very much desired that his crops be of high quality and sought information on the cultivation of the tobacco grown on the York and James Rivers in southeastern Virginia, known throughout the Tidewater and European trading houses as some of the best in the world.²⁵

Despite his studying and investigation, Washington simply could not make tobacco of the quality and on the scale that he would have liked. After 1761, Washington's tobacco harvests underwent continual decline. Certainly the quality of the land was a great handicap. The weather, however, proved to be Washington's principal obstruction. In the midst of one of the worst droughts in recent memory, Washington wrote Robert Cary and

²⁵George Washington to Robert Cary and Company, 20 September 1759, Abbot, ed., PGW, 6: 350; George Washington to Robert Cary and Company, 12 October 1761, Fitzpatrick, ed., WGW, 2: 368; George Washington to Robert Cary and Company, 28 May 1762, Ibid., 2: 376; Ferling, First of Men, p.66; Freeman, Washington, 3: 23, 28.

Company in June 1762 that without a "speedy Interposition of Providence" sent in the form of rain, "we shall not make one oz of Tobacco this year." An inordinate number of weeds appeared amongst the tobacco hills the following year due to "continual and excessive Rains." It was becoming painfully clear to Washington, as early as 1762, that his continued cultivation of the leaf was, at best, ill-advised. As his tobacco perished in the fields, his liabilities were mounting and his creditors were becoming more persistent about their compensation.²⁶

By 1762, Washington was already nineteen hundred pounds in debt. His initial unwillingness to purchase anything on credit had long since been set aside. Finding his plantation in disarray upon his return to Mount Vernon, money was expended on additional slave labor, repair and construction of buildings on the plantation, and on numerous provisions. Washington's own funds, as well as those he received through the dowry of Mrs. Washington, were "swallowed up" before he even realized what had happened. He was unwilling to take complete responsibility for his dire financial situation. From the very early days of Washington's cultivation of the weed he had been convinced that his hogsheads had fetched prices vastly lower than they were worth. Washington came to the conclusion in 1765 that despite

²⁶George Washington to Robert Cary and Company, 28 May 1762, Fitzpatrick, ed., WGW, 2: 378; George Washington to Robert Cary and Company, 20 June 1762, Ibid., 2: 379; George Washington to Burwell Bassett, 5 July 1763, Ibid., 2: 401; Ferling, First of Men, p.66.

careful management of the best and most highly prized varieties of tobacco, the continued cultivation of tobacco in Virginia was only in the interest of British merchants. A new cash crop was essential to Washington's financial survival.²⁷

Washington grew no tobacco at Mount Vernon by 1766. Instead of the annual harvest and drying of tobacco, Washington's slaves were cutting, threshing and storing wheat. Washington began phasing out tobacco production and replacing it with wheat in 1764. He and his slaves grew 257 bushels that first year. By 1766, 2331 bushels of wheat were produced at Mount Vernon and by 1770, Washington was growing six thousand bushels a year. Wheat required far less of the soil and could be successfully grown in worn-out lands like those at Mount Vernon. Cultivating wheat also gave Washington greater control over the marketing of his crop. Selling his crop very often at the nearby port of Alexandria or in the West Indies, Washington was far more effective in negotiating the price per bushel, or per barrel when converted into flour, his crop fetched. Washington did not, however, discourage his tenants from paying their rent in tobacco. Nor did he discontinue production of the leaf on the plantations of the late Daniel Parke Custis, which he and his step-son John Parke Custis then owned. These plantations,

²⁷George Washington to Richard Washington, 15 April 1757, Abbot, ed., PGW, 4: 133; George Washington to Robert Stewart, 27 April 1763, Fitzpatrick, ed., WGW, 2: 397; George Washington to Robert Cary and Company, 20 September 1765, *Ibid.*, 2: 427-428; Ferling, First of Men, pp.65-66.

situated on the York and Pamunkey Rivers, produced tobacco so as to help erase Washington's sizable debt and to subsidize the purchases made on British merchants.²⁸

Disputes over tobacco prices were only one component of the larger controversy which raged between Washington and his British merchants. Some of the most scathing letters to emerge from Washington's pen were written to merchants over the quality and tardiness of goods ordered from England. Limited domestic supplies, lower prices, and the ability to buy on credit made British finished goods very attractive. Like most other planters, Washington purchased items ranging from farm implements and paint to wine glasses and wallpaper. Very often, however, due to irregular communications and distance, items ordered were never received and likewise items received were never ordered. As he began to get the operation at Mount Vernon underway, Washington placed extensive orders in January 1757 for tools and other farm items on Thomas Knox, a Bristol merchant. When the ship arrived in the Rappahannock River late that December, many of the items, including a substantial number of scythes, hoes, and axes, were not on board. Somewhat distressed over the matter, Washington wrote Knox that he would have to purchase the items in the colonies and only then after "sending over good part

²⁸George Washington to Stewart and Campbell, 4 September 1766, Fitzpatrick, ed., WGW, 2: 442; George Washington to Robert Cary and Company, 17 May 1767, Ibid., 2: 454; George Washington to Capel and Osgood Hanbury, 25 July 1769, Ibid., 2: 515; Ferling, First of Men, pp.66-67; Flexner, Indispensable, pp.48-49.

of the Country" for them. At times, the desired goods were sent in the wrong amount. In July 1761, Washington received two dozen whip saws from Robert Cary & Company, having only ordered two.²⁹

More often than not, however, Washington's primary concern was not with these more clerical errors but with the greater problem, as Washington perceived it, of the exportation of shoddy and overpriced goods to the colonies by British merchants. As early as 1760, Washington expressed great concern that the goods shipped to America were neither of high quality nor of the current style but "could only have been used by our Forefathers in the days of yore." Washington was convinced that many British shopkeepers and tradesmen inflated their prices and shipped goods of mediocre or poor quality when they knew the items were destined for America. Bearing this in mind, Washington ordered a spinet for young Patsy Custis in October 1761. Careful that it be charged to her account on the merchant's books, Washington asked that Mr. Cary order the instrument "as for himself or a friend, not let it be known that it [was] intended for Exportation." When he received a new carriage in 1768, costing him in excess of 315 pounds, he found within two years, due to the use of green wood in its construction, that its panels had begun to split. It is indeed not an exaggeration to contend that

²⁹ Invoice from Richard Washington, 20 August 1757, Abbot, ed., *PGW*, 4: 376-379; George Washington to Thomas Knox, 26 December 1757, *Ibid.*, 5: 72; George Washington to Robert Cary and Company, 1 August 1761, Fitzpatrick, *WGW*, 2: 363.

Washington's disaffection for the British imperial system, begun by the dressing down given by Lord Loudon, was further entrenched by his experiences with British merchants. Poor prices for his tobacco and shabby workmanship on his carriage undoubtedly had some effect upon the Washington who initially advocated non-importation of British goods and later led the military effort of Americans against their British brethren.³⁰

Pulling himself out of the financial tailspin brought on by his lackluster performance with tobacco was achieved not only by Washington's increased cultivation of wheat but by the incorporation of various plantation industries. Foremost among these other enterprises was the operation of the gristmill at Mount Vernon. Situated along Dogue Run Creek, the mill and a fifty-six-acre tract around it were purchased by Lawrence Washington in 1738 on behalf of his father Augustine. George Washington and the two masters of Mount Vernon who preceded him used the mill primarily as a means of processing the wheat and corn raised at Mount Vernon and later consumed by the plantation's slave work force. By 1760, however, the mill and the dam which regulated the flow of water into it were in serious disrepair. Very often, the dam would be carried away by the flood waters of Dogue Run Creek. Therefore, Washington agreed

³⁰George Washington to Robert Cary and Company, 28 September 1760, Abbot, ed., PGW, 6: 459-460; Invoice to Robert Cary and Company, 12 October 1761, Fitzpatrick, ed., WGW, 2: 370; George Washington to Robert Cary and Company, 6 June 1768, *Ibid.*, 2: 488, 488-489n; Thane, Potomac Squire, pp.92-93.

with Jeremiah Mitchell, an independent artisan, early in 1760 to begin repairs on the mill the following summer "when She runs dry."³¹

Though Mitchell worked for ninety-seven days, the repairs were only temporary at best. In 1770, tired of constant problems and with expansion of the milling business on his mind, Washington began the construction of a new mill. Engaging a millwright and a stone mason, Washington and his laborers began raising the mill in February of that year. The mill walls had been completed up to the second floor by late June when Washington was forced to reassign his slaves to the wheat fields which lay ready for harvest. Late in September Washington received the millstones he had ordered from Edward Snickers, carefully noting that they were two inches thinner than the thickness that had been agreed on at the time of purchase. Just prior to Christmas, water was coursing through the mill race and Washington's new stones were grinding sand as a means of smoothing their surface. By March 1771, Washington was custom-grinding grains for a one-eighth toll, receiving one barrel of flour for every eight ground, and began to build a very substantial reputation for the quality of his wheat. The flour of his mill, born of either his own wheat or that taken in toll, was, on at least one occasion, sold in the West Indies in

³¹Jackson and Twohig, eds., DGW, 1: 227n, 252, 252n; Ferling, First of Men, 67.

exchange for rum, sugar, or slaves. Washington had gauged the need and the market correctly and was cashing in on his insight.³²

While the waters of the Potomac and its tributaries furnished the master of Mount Vernon with power for his mill and a means of moving his goods to and from the marketplace, it also supplied him with yet another answer to his financial difficulties: fish. Sensing the great economic potential of the enterprise, Washington became one of the first men in the Chesapeake Bay region to develop and operate a commercial fishery. Each spring, as the herrings came upriver to spawn, Washington's hands would repair the European-made seines and cast them into the broad waters of the Potomac River. Once caught, the fish would be cleaned, salted, and packed in barrels for storage and eventual use on the plantation or for shipment. As a less expensive alternative to pork, Washington and many other slave owners fed their bondsmen preserved fish as a source of dietary protein. His initial problems of properly curing and packing his fish became less severe as his hands became more adept at properly packing the casks. These improvements gave Washington a higher quality product which to sell to planters in the sugar-producing islands of the West Indies. Washington even

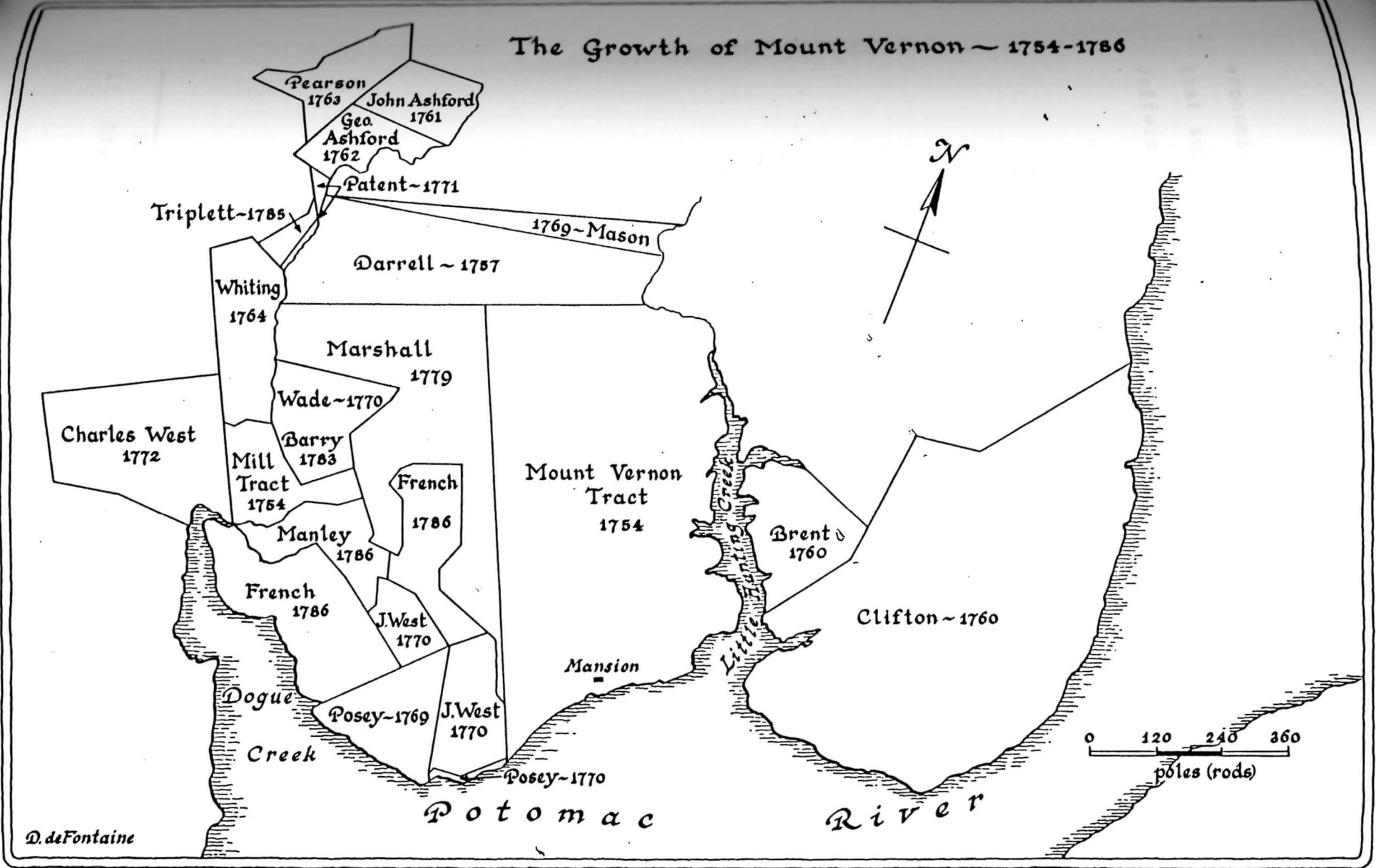
³²Jackson and Twohig, eds., DGW, 1: 252, 252n; Ibid., 2: 204, 204n, 217, 243, 252, 276, 335; Ibid., 3: 18, 24; George Washington to Daniel Jenifer Adams, 20 July 1772, Fitzpatrick, ed., WGW, 3: 98.

had a commercial fishing schooner constructed and launched at Mount Vernon in 1765 and 1766 in the effort of increasing the size of his catches. His fish were sometimes sold at rates two to four times higher than other catches brought from Virginia for sale in the West Indies. Traded for highly prized tropical commodities such as sugar, spirits, coffee, and oranges, Washington's herrings and whitefish permitted him to reserve his capital for paying off his debts, reinvesting in plantation industry, and enlarging the boundaries of Mount Vernon.³³

Flour and fish helped Washington bring about a renaissance at Mount Vernon. What he leased in 1754 and began full-time management of in 1759 was a plantation on the verge of economic collapse. When he left for Boston in 1775 to take up the command of American colonial forces, that collection of land, buildings, and slaves had been radically transformed into a well-organized and fiscally responsible enterprise. By 1770, he had reduced his indebtedness to one thousand pounds and had expanded Mount Vernon's borders to include over six thousand acres, almost three times the size of the initial tract. His surveyor's eye for precision and a strong personal sense of discipline and organization made the operation at Mount Vernon prosper. Washington's attentiveness, forethought, and commitment to commercial diversification saved him and his plantation from the

³³Jackson and Twohig, eds., DGW, 1:261, 261n, 265-266, 341, 341n; Middleton, Tobacco Coast, pp.224-225.

The Growth of Mount Vernon ~ 1754-1786



The Growth of Mount Vernon, 1754-86

economic ruin so many other planters faced. A fate much like that suffered by his close friend and fellow-farmer, Thomas Jefferson.³⁴

³⁴Jackson and Twohig, eds., DGW, 1: 241; Flexner, Washington, 1: 284.

Chapter II

Mr. Jefferson and his Plantations (1809-1826)

"A Virginia estate managed rigorously well yields comfortable subsistence to its owner living on it, but nothing more. but it runs him in debt annually if at a distance from him, if he is absent, if he is unskilful as I am, if short crops reduce him to deal on credit, and most assuredly if thunder struck from the hand of a friend as I was."

Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe,
February 22, 1826

II

Thomas Jefferson's home atop the sugar-loaf-shaped hill he named Monticello, the Italian word for "little mountain," is a testament to the ideas and ideals of the European Renaissance. Peering into the parlors, or reading any number of documents in his hand, it becomes very clear that Jefferson was a man of many interests. Engaged in ventures ranging from architecture and music to botany and studies of Native Americans, Jefferson was by all standards an anomaly in early America. His early study of law and entrance into Virginia's colonial and later state governments during the explosive era of the American Revolution brought Jefferson to the center of the eighteenth-century political arena. By 1809, after having served eight years as President of the United States, Jefferson became, for largely the first time in his life, a major Virginia planter. Having managed his Albemarle and Bedford County estates from afar for some forty years, he was now compelled to deal directly with many of the challenges and difficulties which confronted large Virginia planters of his day. Jefferson would quickly find that this task was not a small one and that his protracted absences from Monticello and his other lands had made financial stability and solvency an elusive quarry. The last seventeen years of his life, until his death July 4, 1826, were, undoubtedly, his darkest days.

Life began for Jefferson on April 13, 1743. The eldest son

of Peter and Jane Jefferson, young Thomas was born at their simple, central Virginia home, named Shadwell, in the shadow of what would later be Monticello. In 1735, Peter Jefferson patented one thousand acres of prime tobacco land along the Rivanna River, a tributary of the great James River. Of the middling planter aristocracy, Peter Jefferson had accumulated a modest fortune through the cultivation of the weed by enslaved Negro laborers. Thomas' primary interests, throughout his entire life, however, seemed to lie elsewhere. His pursuit of agriculture in his early years, and to a great extent for his entire life, took a back seat to the study and practice of law and to the business of government.¹

At fourteen, Thomas was enrolled in a school operated by the Reverend James Maury, an Anglican churchman residing in Albemarle county. His two years of intensive training in classical languages and literature were later built upon during his years at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia's colonial capital. Jefferson went on to study the law for five years in the law office of George Wythe, a Virginia signatory of the Declaration of Independence and one of the colony's premier statesmen. Admitted to the Virginia bar in 1767, Jefferson went into the practice of the law, apparently with some measure of

¹Noble Cunningham, In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), p.1; Dumas Malone, Jefferson and His Time, 6 vols., (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1948-1981), 1: 3-4.

success. In December of the following year, while just twenty-six years old, Jefferson was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses as one of the two representatives for Albemarle County. The young Virginian could not have arrived in a more timely fashion, for as he took his seat in the House, conflict between English North America and Great Britain was becoming increasingly more intense. For the much of the remainder of Jefferson's life his principal pursuits revolved around the separation of the colonies from Britain and the construction of a new American government.²

The winds of revolution propelled Jefferson into the American Continental Congress in June 1775. During the early summer of 1776, he prepared the Declaration of Independence which formally severed the imperial relationship with Great Britain. Following his return from the Philadelphia Congress that September, Jefferson served three years in the Virginia House of Delegates and in 1779 succeeded Patrick Henry as the state's second governor. Jefferson served as a member of the Virginia delegation to the Confederation Congress in 1783 and 1784. Early in May of the latter year, he set sail for Europe as that body's commissioner and minister to France.³

Jefferson returned to America from Paris in November 1789.

²Malone, Jefferson, 1: 40, 42-43; Cunningham, Pursuit, 7, 14-15.

³Cunningham, Pursuit, 36, 48-51, 53, 63-64, 84, 87.

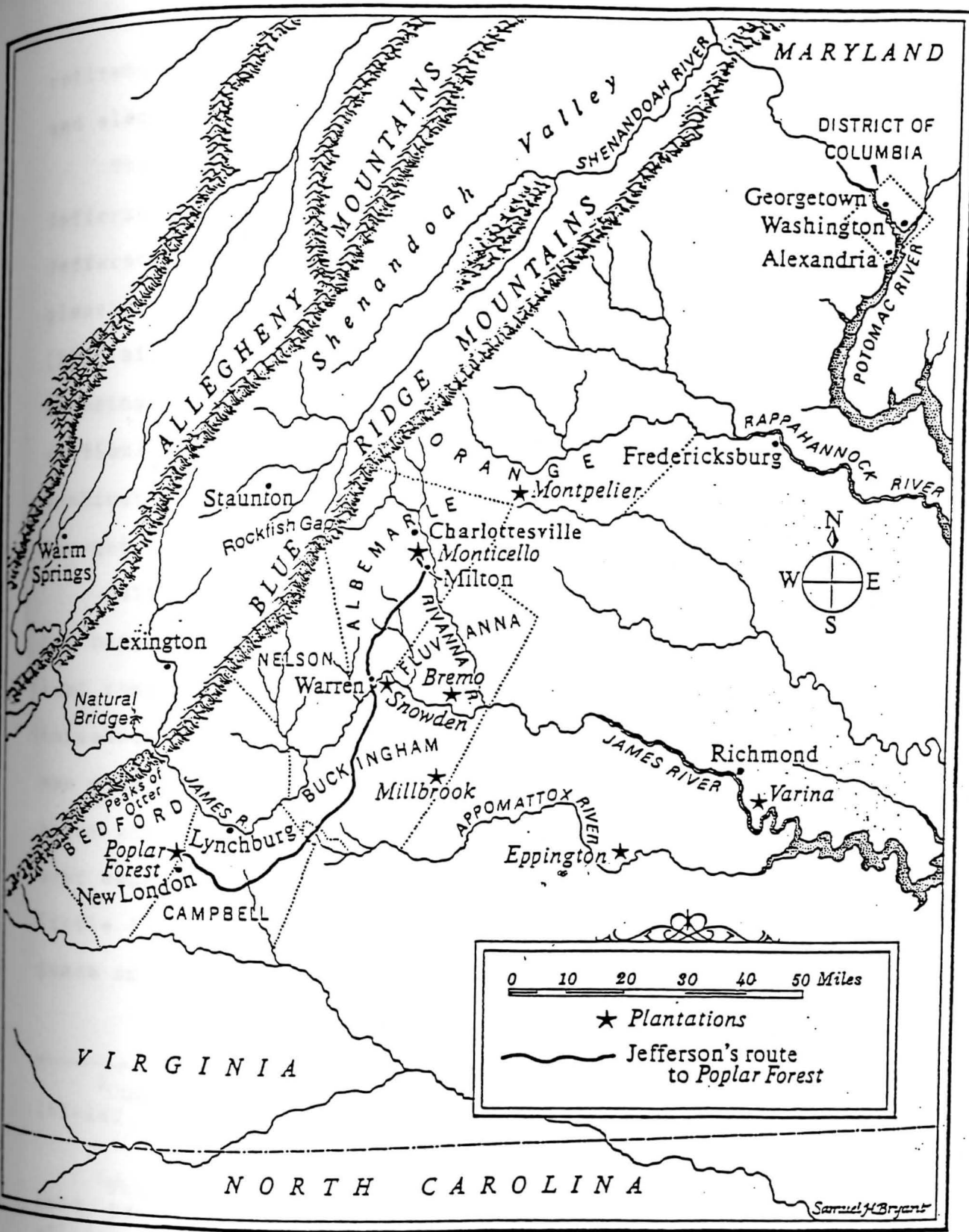
When he disembarked at the Virginia port of Norfolk, he found America in many respects the same as when he departed five years before. Yet there were the fundamental changes in the way Americans governed themselves that marked the nation's change. No longer ruled by the statutes of the Articles of Confederation, America was now administered by the laws set down by the United States Constitution. That December, President George Washington asked his younger Virginia contemporary to serve as the nation's first secretary of state, a position which Jefferson accepted and served in until 1793.⁴

In 1796, after only a few short years at Monticello, Jefferson was elected as Vice President of the United States. The presidential election four years later made Jefferson the third American chief executive. He served the nation for two consecutive terms during one of its most dynamic and volatile periods. Jefferson had arranged for the purchase of the vast territory of Louisiana and had witnessed the rapid deterioration of American relations with Great Britain and France. The conclusion of Jefferson's tenure as President in March 1809 left his successor, James Madison, with many substantial threats to the security of the nation. As he turned to the concerns of farmer and business man, the American nation, to which he had devoted the vast majority of his life, stood on the verge of war with either its one time ally, France, or its long-standing

⁴Ibid., 131.

adversary, Great Britain. By 1809, as Jefferson moved into retirement from public service, America faced its greatest test since the Revolution.

Jefferson's mountaintop retreat of Monticello had been his home since the land was first cleared and leveled in 1768. Hastened by the destruction of Shadwell, gutted by fire in February 1770, a portion of Monticello had been completed by the following November so as to allow Jefferson to take up residence there. The Rivanna River land on which Monticello was constructed, owned by Jefferson's deceased father Peter, came into Jefferson's possession in 1764 when he reached the age of twenty-one. In conjunction with the Shadwell tract he rented from his mother, Jefferson's Albemarle County holdings amounted to 2650 acres. His other properties brought the young lawyer's real estate possessions to roughly five thousand acres. The death of his father-in-law, John Wayles, in May 1773, soon added an additional eleven thousand acres to Jefferson's already substantial holdings (six thousand acres were eventually sold by Jefferson to pay his share of Wayles' sizable debt to an English mercantile concern). When the division of property was made the following year Jefferson received, on behalf of his wife, Martha Wayles Skelton, several plantations in Bedford and Goochland Counties. The most notable of these, and the only one which Jefferson retained through his entire life, was the Bedford County plantation known as Poplar Forest. Jefferson would spend many hours at this inherited estate especially during his



Jefferson's Country, 1809 - 1826

Samuel H. Bryant

retirement when he oversaw there the construction of a sizable and elegant home.⁵

The burdens of the Presidency were weighing very heavily on Jefferson by early 1809. He wrote to his daughter, Martha Jefferson Randolph, that he was very much looking forward to the pleasures and benefits of retirement. "Moored in the midst of [his] affections and free to follow the pursuits" of his own choosing, he saw retirement as an escape from the trials and difficulties of public service. His difficult return from Washington to Monticello was just the beginning of a retirement fraught with hardship.⁶

Jefferson departed the nation's capital on March 11. He and his baggage train travelled four days over difficult and poorly kept roads. The former president found the journey easier on horseback, spending the last three days in the saddle. His trip was made yet more difficult by the onset of a freak spring snow storm which Jefferson felt was the most "disagreeable" he had ever experienced. What he found at Monticello undoubtedly did little for his morale. While he certainly was heartened by the peace and familiarity of the people and surroundings of the

⁵Cunningham, Pursuit, pp.9, 18; Malone, Jefferson, 1: 125, 161-162.

⁶Thomas Jefferson to Martha Jefferson Randolph, 27 February 1809, Edwin Morris Betts and James Adam Bear, Jr., eds., The Family Letters of Thomas Jefferson, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1966), 385.

estate, Monticello bore the marks of the master's protracted absences. Though certainly Jefferson had maintained consistent correspondence with his managers and overseers, the plantations had undergone considerable decay during his twelve years in Washington. As he settled into the life of the farmer, Jefferson would soon discover that forty years of tobacco planting had exhausted much of his land in Albemarle and Bedford Counties. Four decades of absence and inattentiveness had consumed most of his liquid assets, driving him further and further into debt.⁷

Prior to the American Revolution, the system of trading between the southern colonies and Great Britain had the effect of promoting purchase on credit. As has been shown, this system nearly destroyed the financial stability of many great planters, including George Washington. Unlike Washington, however, many planters long after the Revolution still owed considerable sums to British merchants. In the case of Jefferson, he was not only indebted to British concerns on pre-war accounts but also to a Dutch firm for a debt incurred during the 1790s. His eight years as President further enlarged his debt by eleven thousand dollars. As interest continued to accumulate, Jefferson searched for a means of checking his growing liabilities. He resolved to use the twenty-five-hundred-dollar yearly income of his Bedford

⁷Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 17 March 1809, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress. Hereafter cited as DLC; Merrill D. Peterson, Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: A Biography, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.923.

holdings to eliminate his numerous and sizable debts. It would soon become obvious to Jefferson, however, that neither these lands nor his Albemarle County lands on which he hoped to sustain himself were equal to their tasks.³

Jefferson's principal cash crop at Monticello and his other Albemarle County holdings was wheat. Normally grown in the majority of Jefferson's lands in that county, wheat was the natural alternative for cultivation in soil all but destroyed by years of intensive tobacco planting. Most of Jefferson's wheat was of the winter variety. It was sowed usually from August to December, became dormant through the winter months, and began growing again once temperatures rose and the ground began to thaw. The crop then grew until late June or July when Jefferson's slaves went into the fields to harvest. Once gathered, the crop was then taken to a number of small granaries at Monticello where it was threshed (the process of beating the grain from the husks) and stored until the winter months, largely in late November or early December. Now dry, a wheat fan was then used to separate the grain from the chaff. At Monticello, the wheat was then stored in the granaries until it was transported to his gristmill on the Rivanna River to be ground

³Thomas Jefferson to John Barnes, 17 January 1810, DLC; Malone, Jefferson, 6: 507.

into flour.⁹

Jefferson thought that within a few years of his return to Monticello his farms would eradicate his debts. He naturally looked to his wheat fields for a major portion of the revenue necessary to meet such a great challenge. His Albemarle County wheat, and the little that was grown at Poplar Forest and his other Bedford County plantations, normally fell far short of his hopes and expectations. Pests and the elements continually plagued Jefferson and his wheat throughout his retirement. When Jefferson was so desperately in need of cash and credit, he saw his wheat chilled by frosts, parched by heat, flooded by rain, and consumed by rusts, smuts, and Hessian flies.¹⁰

One of the first major decisions Jefferson made after his return to Monticello was to raise the acreage he had in wheat from 450 to 600 acres. The cultivation of Jefferson's 1810 crop of wheat, like many others that followed, met with considerable difficulty. He wrote James Monroe in May 1811 that the spring's meager rainfall was exacting heavy losses on the crops. As if drought were not sufficient, Jefferson also told his Albemarle County neighbor, recently appointed secretary of state under

⁹Edwin Morris Betts, ed., Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, for the American Philosophical Society, 1953; repr., Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), 201; Thomas Jefferson to Archibald Robertson, 29 November 1812, Jefferson Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, hereafter cited as MHi.

¹⁰Ibid.

James Madison, that the dreaded Hessian fly was beginning to appear "alarmingly in our growing crops." Despite later rains, the damage wrought by the fly insured considerable losses. Jefferson later estimated in a letter to the President that the crop would be but two-thirds of that raised the year before. Unfortunately for Jefferson, this was but the first in a series of poor Monticello harvests.¹¹

Central Virginia was subjected in May 1812 to a siege of rain which dropped ten inches in as many days. It ended with a wave of "very destructive hail." Wind, rain, and hail are perhaps the greatest enemy of wheat and wheat farmers, particularly when the crop is in the advanced stages of growth. Severe weather has the effect of beating down the tall thin growths of wheat so as to prevent them from being effectively harvested. The following year, as his harvesters went into the field, Jefferson found that his wheat was in the poorest condition he had ever seen. While a difficult winter and the fly had brought about great damage, drought and heat had dried the skin of the crops to such an extent that "it fell before the scythe instead of being cut." Believing that the harvest had been the poorest since 1755, Jefferson projected that he would

¹¹Thomas Jefferson to John Barnes, 17 January 1810, DLC; Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, 5 May 1811, Ibid., Thomas Jefferson to Charles Bankhead, 10 June 1811, Edwin Morris Betts, ed., Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book, 1766-1824, (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1944), 459; Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 3 July 1811, DLC.

not make a third of an average crop. In many of the years that followed, inclement weather, in one form or another, brought destruction to Jefferson's wheat. Even if by some twist of fate Jefferson was able to make a tolerable crop, he often faced problems, once again due to an absence of rainfall. As the water in the river disappeared under the powerful Virginia sun, so too did the power to his water-driven flour mills. Prolonged drought could very often reduce the depth of the rivers to the point that the barges which carried produce, including Jefferson's wheat, to and from Monticello could not be floated.¹²

The Rivanna River provided power to Jefferson's two flour grinding mills. Located on the Shadwell portion of his property, Jefferson operated a grist mill as well as a large manufacturing flour mill. Jefferson's father Peter constructed the first mill on the Rivanna in about 1757. Jefferson used that facility until it was washed away by the great flood of 1771. Jefferson's extended absences from Monticello precluded its reconstruction until 1803. Anxious to fill the need in the community for custom grinding, Jefferson began the construction in that same year of a large merchant mill. For three years Jefferson spent over ten thousand dollars to construct the mill, over and above the twenty thousand dollars he had spent on the canal and dam he had

¹²Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 25 May 1812, DLC; Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 13 July 1813, Ibid., Thomas Jefferson to Jeremiah Goodman, 26 July 1813, Ibid..

completed in 1803.¹³

These facilities were one of the passions of Jefferson's life. Edmund Bacon, his trusted Monticello overseer, stated that soon after the mill had begun grinding, a freshet swept away the dam which regulated the flow of water it used for power. Noting that eleven thousand bushels were at the mill ready for grinding, Bacon was astounded by the reaction of his employer. Noting that "he never seemed to get tired of paying out money for it," Jefferson was entirely unmoved by the matter. Francis Calley Gray, a New England visitor at Monticello in 1814, observed a similar reaction, with similar amazement, when a buildup of ice carried away thirty feet of the dam. Gray supposed from Jefferson's demeanor and tone that his losses amounted to one or two hundred dollars. In reality, some estimates of the damage, according to the visitor, went as high as thirty thousand dollars. While this amount is most likely too high, Jefferson's losses were certainly sizable. That he was unexcited by the disaster suggests that he was probably very even-tempered and calm in times of crisis. It also might imply, however, that Jefferson had only a marginal understanding of his financial

¹³Betts, ed., Farm Book, pp.341-343.

condition.¹⁴

The toll mill was operated by Jefferson for his exclusive use. Youen Carden, the miller, served Jefferson from 1808 to 1824 and apparently did so with distinction, for Jefferson gave him a substantial bonus for his services in late 1809. The manufacturing mill, however, was leased out by Jefferson to tenants. Isaac and Jonathan Shoemaker became the mill's first lessees in January 1807. They carried a five-year lease and were obligated to pay Jefferson \$1250 in rent per year, paid in flour in lieu of currency. The Shoemakers, however, proved to be insufferable business partners. Martha Jefferson Randolph wrote her father in 1809 before he left Washington that the prevailing hope among those of the neighborhood was that he would retrieve the mill from the incapable hands of the Shoemakers. Martha felt that Shoemaker had not one shred of integrity and his credit was "so low that nothing but necessity induced any one to trust him with their grain."¹⁵

Almost immediately after his return to Monticello, Jefferson began to press the Shoemakers for improvements in the operation

¹⁴James A. Bear, Jr., ed., Jefferson at Monticello, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1967), pp.64-65; Francis Calley Gray, Thomas Jefferson in 1814: Being an Account of a Visit to Monticello, Virginia, (Boston: The Club of Odd Volumes, 1924), p.74.

¹⁵Martha Jefferson Randolph to Thomas Jefferson, 2 March 1809, Betts and Bear, eds., Family Letters, p.387; Settlement with Youen Carden, 29 November 1809, MHi; Betts, ed., Farm Book, p.342.

of the mill and payment of the back rent. Much correspondence passed between the parties with very little change for the better. The Shoemakers finally sold their lease, a year ahead of its completion, to Thomas Eston Randolph and James McKenny. After McKenny withdrew from the business, Randolph took in a variety of partners in the business until the early 1820s when he began to operate the business on his own. Controversies over the form the rent was to be paid in and in what amount raged between Jefferson and his tenants throughout his retirement. In the end, Jefferson was never able to make the business a profitable one. Difficulties in securing the rent due him, damage by flood and ice, and the frequent absence of water in the river for power made the mill a disastrous investment.¹⁶

As his wheat disintegrated in the fields, and his mill produced little more than aggravation, Jefferson looked to his tobacco as a source of financial relief. Though grown on a small scale at Monticello, cultivation of the leaf was the principal pursuit of Jefferson's Bedford County lands and work force. Tobacco was first raised at Monticello in 1768 and was the major crop there until the lands would no longer bear sufficient quantities. Jefferson had grown tobacco on the fertile lands of Bedford county since his wife had received them as an inheritance

¹⁶Thomas Jefferson to Jonathan Shoemaker, 6 April 1809, MHi; Thomas Jefferson to Jonathan Shoemaker, 15 June 1809, Ibid.; Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Eston Randolph, 18 June 1816, Ibid.; Betts, ed., Farm Book, pp.342-343.

in the early 1770s. That tobacco made in Albemarle County was transported by water in bateaux to Richmond for sale. His Bedford County crop was taken to nearby Lynchburg where it was either sold or ferried down the James River for sale at Richmond.¹⁷

The benefits and risks of tobacco-growing had changed little since the leaf first arrived in Virginia two hundred years before. It could bring fabulous fortunes but could also bring about utter financial ruin. The traditional enemies of tobacco and tobacco cultivators remained. Unfortunately for Jefferson and his fellow Virginians still engaged in the production of the plant in the early decades of the nineteenth century, they made their presence painfully known. Jefferson faced crisis very early in his retirement when he was informed by the overseer at Poplar Forest that frost had inflicted great damage on the plantation's delicate tobacco plantings, destroying perhaps a third of the crop. Drought in 1815 and cold in 1816 deflated many of the hopes Jefferson had for financial stability. Joel Yancey, Jefferson's superintendent of plantations in Bedford County, informed him in September 1820 that for the first time in his life, he had failed to produce a sufficient number of tobacco plantings. Without an adequate number of plantings, the prospect of flood, drought, or disease could make the cultivation of even

¹⁷Betts, ed., Farm Book, p.255.

a mediocre crop remote.¹⁸

Jefferson, like Washington, was convinced that his tobacco was not bringing a just price. By 1818 Jefferson had so lost faith in the Richmond merchants that he turned to the market in Lynchburg as an outlet for his tobacco. His 1817 and 1818 tobacco crops were sold in the western Virginia river town in the hope that its "intrinsic character" would be better known there and would thus bring a better price. However, on the advice of Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Jefferson's grandson who had taken over the management of his Monticello properties in 1815, they discontinued selling tobacco in Lynchburg in 1820 and returned to the Richmond market. Jefferson's tobacco, however, was not always of first quality. Numerous letters to and from Jefferson and several merchants attest to the fact that the tobacco cultivated in Bedford County and on Jefferson's Albemarle County lands very often reached the market place in poor condition. George Jefferson wrote the master of Monticello in May 1811 that the six hogsheads of tobacco that he had received in Richmond were so poor that he did not even receive an offer for them. The merchant described them as "badly culled" and the barrel of

¹⁸Thomas Jefferson to George Jefferson, 1 May 1809, MHi; Thomas Jefferson to Martha Jefferson Randolph, 31 August 1815, Betts and Bear, eds., Family Letters, p.410; Thomas Jefferson to David B. Warden, 17 May 1816, Betts, ed., Farm Book, p.557; Joel Yancey to Thomas Jefferson, 6 September 1820, MHi.

stemmed tobacco as "nearly as bad as I ever saw."¹⁹

Jefferson's drive for financial solvency and independence did not end with his tobacco barns or his granaries. Near the great house, along what was termed "Mulberry Row" (a row of slave dwellings and shops), Jefferson constructed in 1794 a facility for the commercial manufacture of nails. Jefferson purchased his nail rod from Jones and Howell, a Philadelphia ironmonger, and had it shipped via the James River to Monticello. Two forges were operated at the nailery and in 1796, the manufacture of hand-wrought nails began to be supplemented by those produced by a nail-cutting machine. By 1810, the nailery was producing six tons of nails per year and had acquired a considerable list of clients. Bacon recalled that he sold James Monroe the nails he used to construct the great house at Ashlawn, his plantation located not far from Monticello in Albemarle County.²⁰

Like most of his other ventures, success at the Monticello nailery proved largely elusive. Jefferson soon discovered that many merchants, facing the same shortage of funds that he was, found it more advantageous to import nails on credit than make purchases from domestic sources like that in operation at

¹⁹George Jefferson to Thomas Jefferson, 16 May 1811, MHi; Thomas Jefferson to Patrick Gibson, 18 February 1818, Ibid.; Thomas Jefferson to Joel Yancey, 25 May 1819, Ibid.; Thomas Jefferson to Joel Yancey, 11 May 1821, Ibid.; Cunningham, Pursuit, p.325.

²⁰Betts, ed., Farm Book, pp.77, 426-428; Betts, ed., Garden Book, p.427; Bear, ed., Jefferson at Monticello, p.69; Jones and Howell to Thomas Jefferson, 16 August 1809, MHi.

Monticello. Though Jefferson's factory had built a substantial clientele, many of his customers bought nails on credit. Payments on orders from the nailery were few and far between and Jefferson was generally very reluctant to press his debtors or to turn away any customer, regardless of their ability to pay. Cash became so short that Jefferson temporarily suspended the operation of the nail factory in 1811 until sufficient funds could be gathered for the purchase of nail rod. Though the factory was reopened briefly in early 1812, war with Great Britain brought the warships of the Royal Navy to the east coast of the United States and cut off the supply of nail stock to Monticello, thus forcing the facility to close for the duration of the conflict. While Jefferson got back into the nail business in 1815 and maintained the nailery until 1823, it never operated at the same level it had prior to the war.²¹

The conflict with Britain also forced Jefferson and many other plantation owners to begin the large-scale manufacture of cloth. He saw this as an inexpensive and convenient means of gaining a measure of financial autonomy from the Richmond merchants. Though Jefferson had some equipment at Monticello prior to the war, such as a spinning wheel, common loom, and hand carding machine, it was 1811 before he purchased a Spinning Jenny

²¹ Betts, ed., Farm Book, p.428; Thomas Jefferson to Jones and Howell, 10 August 1809, MHi; Thomas Jefferson to Jones and Howell, 10 January 1811, Ibid.; Thomas Jefferson to Jones and Howell, 3 April 1811, Ibid.; Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Jones, 4 March 1815, Ibid.

and a more advanced loom. By employing four female slaves, two women and two girls, Jefferson estimated that they would "more than furnish" the "2000. yards of linen, cotton, & woolen" required each year to clothe his plantation work force.

Embargoed and blockaded throughout the War of 1812, home manufacture of cloth at Monticello and at Poplar Forest grew at a rapid pace.²²

Jefferson also saw spinning and weaving as a matter of civic duty. Domestic manufacture of cloth was a means by which America could, in Jefferson's mind, not only support itself during times of war but also move toward commercial independence, particularly from Great Britain. By January 1812, Jefferson was convinced that Americans would import only twenty percent of the "coarse clothing" purchased annually in the past. Taking great pride in his cloth manufactory and those on other plantations, Jefferson wrote to General Thaddeus Kosciuszko, a Polish officer who served in America during the Revolution, that American "manufactures are now very nearly on a footing with those of England." Through spinning and weaving he was seeking for America the same separation from Britain that he advocated in 1776.²³

²²Thomas Jefferson to Jeremiah Goodman, 21 February 1812, Betts, ed., Farm Book, p.471,; Ibid., 464; Thomas Jefferson to William Maclure, 10 September 1811, MHi; Thomas Jefferson to Thaddeus Kosciuszko, 28 June 1812, DLC.

²³Thomas Jefferson to William Thornton, 14 January 1812, DLC; Thomas Jefferson to Thaddeus Kosciuszko, 28 June 1812, MHi.

Jefferson also operated a distillery at Monticello for the use of his family and slave population. With the assistance of Joseph Miller, an English captain familiar with the business, Jefferson distilled and brewed in the spring and fall months of each year producing assorted spirits from various grains, including corn, rye and wheat. Jefferson, however, drank very little of what was produced on his plantations and was insistent that his slaves not be exposed to the effects of over-indulgence in alcohol. While still serving in Washington, Jefferson instructed his Monticello overseer, John Holmes Freeman, that he was to refrain from giving slaves any form of whiskey, with the exception of those working in "water in cool weather." He felt that the best use of whiskey when it came to his slaves was as a means of preventing colds and sickness. Its casual use or misuse among his slaves was seen by Jefferson as both "injurious & demoralising" to their overall morale and effectiveness.²⁴

Life for Jefferson's Albemarle and Bedford County slaves is a subject that has attracted considerable scholarly interest. As is the case with many plantations, an understanding of the daily lives of slaves at Monticello and Jefferson's other farms requires a substantial amount of guess work and conjecture. Though Jefferson stated very clearly in his Autobiography that there was nothing "more certainly written in the book of fate"

²⁴Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes Freeman, 21 December 1805, Betts, ed., Farm Book, p.417; Betts, Farm Book, 414; Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Coppinger, 22 April 1815, DLC.

than that American slaves would one day be free, forced labor at his plantations was a reality and would continue to be so even after his death. It is clear, however, that Jefferson was a largely benevolent master and was careful to insure for his slaves sufficient food, clothing, rest, and shelter. Some historians, such as John C. Miller, insist that Jefferson's relative kindness to his slaves was simply an effort to salve his conscience. It is perhaps more prudent to suggest that the master of Monticello, like Washington, understood the greater value of a well fed and cared for labor force over one that was mistreated and starved. To deprive his slaves of adequate food was pure folly as, in Jefferson's words, "neither people nor horses can work unless well fed."²⁵

Whatever his motivation, the lot of slave at Monticello, Poplar Forest, or any of Jefferson's other plantations was good by eighteenth and nineteenth century standards. Contemporary accounts indicate that Jefferson acted kindly and moderately toward his slaves. Opposed to the frequent use of physical punishment, Jefferson was more disposed to sell those slaves who acted in a rebellious fashion or were prone to attempt escape. While in Washington, he asked his son-in-law, Thomas Mann

²⁵Thomas Jefferson to Jeremiah Goodman, 23 December 1814, Betts, ed., Farm Book, p.535; Thomas Jefferson, Autobiography, Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert E. Bergh, eds., The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, 20 vols., (Washington, D.C.: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 1903), 1: 72; John Chester Miller, The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery, (New York: The Free Press, 1977).

Randolph, to caution the Monticello overseer to reserve the whip for only the most extreme of cases. To indulge in regular beatings, in Jefferson's mind, degraded the slaves in their own eyes and stripped them of any measure of self-motivation.

Jefferson felt that shaming or embarrassing a slave guilty of some transgression was a far more effective tool in maintaining plantation discipline. Edmund Bacon recalled in his reminiscences that there had once been an occasion where a nailery slave, Jim Hubbard, had been caught stealing nails from the factory. Jefferson made arrangements to meet Bacon and Jim at the overseer's house the following morning during his ride of the plantations. When Jim appeared before Jefferson, Bacon said that he "never saw any person, white or black, feel as badly." After admonishing Jim not to steal again, Jefferson told Bacon that he had suffered enough and that further punishment was not necessary. Thus by instilling a sense of duty and contribution in his slaves, Jefferson could frequently avoid the use of physical punishment.²⁶

Jefferson made a count of his slaves, including those in Bedford county, in the early months of 1810. At Monticello and the smaller plantations in Albemarle County, Jefferson owned 114 slaves. Of that number, thirty-seven were employed as house servants and twenty-two were classified as tradesmen (nailers,

²⁶Bear, ed., Jefferson at Monticello, pp.97-99; Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph, 23 January 1801, Betts, ed., Farm Book, p.442.

coopers, carpenters, etc.). The remaining slaves were employed in the cultivation of the crops and the many other physical jobs associated with farm operations. Though Jefferson did not classify his slaves in Bedford county into such categories, the proportions were probably similar, especially after the great house was constructed at Poplar Forest and Jefferson was making more frequent trips there to oversee the operations. With Jefferson frequently in residence there, a large house staff would be required to clean the mansion, cook for the guests, and care for the horses.²⁷

The records in Jefferson's hand indicate that his slaves were given blankets, clothing, and other items on a yearly rotation. Isaac, a slave at Monticello, recalled that the slaves in the nailery received "a pound of meat a week, a dozen herrings, a quart of molasses, and a peck of meal." The rest of the plantation laborers probably received a similar allotment. If the slaves at Monticello were like those of many other plantations, they probably raised gardens as well to supplement their diets. The sparsity of written records has forced historians to look more closely at archaeological data to make determinations about the way of life for slaves at Monticello. Recent excavations done at Mulberry Row indicates that there was a variety at Monticello in terms of the slave experience. A plantation bondsman may have lived in a twelve-by-fourteen-foot

²⁷Betts, ed., Farm Book, p.128.

log cabin with a dirt floor or in a thirty-four-by-seventeen-foot stone home with a wood floor and a neoclassical facade. The differences in accommodations and even diet, though largely unclear, can be attributed to favor and position within the plantation work force, with those employed within the house or in a trade usually receiving preferential accommodations and provisions.²⁸

As his slaves tended the fields, groomed the horses, and built tobacco barrels, Jefferson plummeted further and further into debt. He wrote letter after letter attempting to recover money owed him and to delay the calls of his creditors for payment. At the same time, Jefferson, continued to spend substantial amounts of money. As late as 1822, Jefferson was hiring craftsmen and purchasing materials for the final phase of building at Monticello. Begun in 1806, the construction of the great house at Poplar Forest accelerated once Jefferson went into retirement and could more closely supervise the project. By 1814, with the work on the interior all but completed, Jefferson estimated that "the whole, as it now stands, could not be valued at less than 10,000. D. [dollars]." Despite his poor financial condition, Jefferson also made a one-thousand dollar contribution in 1817 to Central College, the precursor of the University of

²⁸ Betts, ed., Farm Book, 142-143; Bear, ed., Jefferson at Monticello, p.23; William M. Kelso, "Mulberry Row: Slave Life at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello," Archaeology 39 (September/October 1986): 31-32.

Virginia.²⁹

Jefferson was guilty of generosity to a fault. He was not only bled dry by the constant flow of visitors to Monticello but was also very susceptible to the pleas of his neighbors for food. Bacon recalled that in the year 1816, Albemarle County and the surrounding country was struck by a severe frost which destroyed a vast quantity of the corn growing in the fields. Hearing of a region at the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains where the corn had avoided destruction, Bacon went there and secured thirty barrels at a very high cost. By the time the wagon returned with the purchases, Jefferson, deluged with requests for corn by the area's "poor trifling people," had given away much of the load. Bacon added that he could hardly haul it fast enough to keep up with Jefferson's dispersions. Jefferson obviously took his responsibilities as a member of the gentry very seriously.³⁰

When coupled with the limited fruits of his fields and mills, Jefferson ability to spend had brought him to the brink of financial disaster. When he sold his library to the United States Congress in 1815, the \$23,950 he received for it eradicated less than half of his indebtedness. Economic recession and panic in 1819 severely limited his ability even to

²⁹Thomas Jefferson to John Wayles Eppes, 16 July 1814, Betts, ed., Garden Book, p.534; Cunningham, Pursuit, p.345; Jack McLaughlin, Jefferson and Monticello: The Biography of a Builder, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988), p.333.

³⁰Bear, ed., Jefferson at Monticello, pp.75-76, 113-114.

sell off land or slaves as a means of raising cash. Early in 1824, Thomas Jefferson Randolph (Jeff), was unsuccessful in selling any of Jefferson's Bedford County slaves for "ready money" and was forced to do so on the basis of two years of credit. Undoubtedly, however, the fatal blow to Jefferson's hopes for fiscal solvency came in 1818. At the request of his grandson, Jefferson co-signed two \$10,000 notes for Wilson Carey Nicholas, Jeff's father-in-law and then governor of Virginia. The following year, Nicholas defaulted and left Jefferson with a \$1,200-a-year payment to be made.³¹

With his options rapidly disappearing, and his debts now amounting to over \$100,000, Jefferson came to the conclusion in early 1826 that a lottery, with his house and lands in Albemarle county as the prize, would relieve him of his indebtedness. Retaining a life interest in the property and with the stipulation that Martha would be permitted two years of residence at the house following his death, Jefferson would have a place to spend his last days and be buried at and at the same time would satisfy all of his creditors. The Virginia legislature later authorized the lottery and tickets were printed. Unfortunately, by the time of Jefferson's death in July 1826 no tickets had been sold. Jefferson died a spiritually and financially broken man.³²

³¹Thomas Jefferson to Bernard Peyton, 5 January 1824, MHi; Cunningham, Pursuit, pp.345-346.

³²Cunningham, Pursuit, p.347.

The master of Monticello never pretended to be an outstanding farmer. Several months before his death he confessed to his grandson Jeff that much of his financial distress was due, among such things as a general depression in the farming business and fluctuations in the value of money, to his "own unskillful management." Jefferson was very much out of his element in the fields or in his shops. He was a lawyer by training and a politician by trade. While his farms and increasing debts were on his mind constantly throughout his retirement, especially in the years just prior to his death, his other interests, such as politics and the construction of the University of Virginia, remained the passions of his life. Despite his early connections to the soil, Jefferson saw his farms as simply a means of sustaining life and limb. He clearly preferred the culture of the garden to that of mass agricultural production. Jefferson, during his years in office, in Europe, and even in retirement, committed only a limited portion of his time, energy, and considerable skills to the operation of his farms. His financial condition at the end of his life should therefore come as no surprise.³³

³³Thomas Jefferson to Charles Wilson Peale, 20 August 1811, Betts, ed., Garden Book, p.461; Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Jefferson Randolph, 8 February 1826, in Sarah N. Randolph, The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson, (New York, 1871; repr., Charlottesville: Published for the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation by the University Press of Virginia, 1978), p.415.

Chapter III

The Two Virginians

"Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if he ever had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth."

Thomas Jefferson,
Notes of the State of Virginia

III

The Virginia of Washington and Jefferson's day revolved around planting, particularly the planting of tobacco. A young man's economic and social standing was contingent upon his ability to amass land and other wealth, particularly slaves, through the pursuit of agriculture. Many, like Washington, took this direct route to affluence, social prominence, and political importance. Jefferson, however, was a member of a much more singular circle of the Virginia gentry. He led the life of both lawyer and politician as well as that of the gentleman planter. The plantations of Mount Vernon and Monticello thus reveal some of the fundamental differences in attitude and outlook borne by their masters. On a much broader level, an examination of Washington's Mount Vernon farms and the plantations of Thomas Jefferson permit a candid view of two of Virginia's premier citizens, and two of America's foremost leaders.

A gentleman's plantation was indeed a reflection of the personality of the planter. When Washington came to the plow in 1759, he did so with a limited knowledge of agriculture. Familiarity with the latest farming techniques and processes, while important, was not the element essential for a planter's success. What Washington possessed was sound judgement, uncompromising integrity, and deep personal commitment. These three characteristics guided Washington's direction of his farms, his dealings with British merchants, and his relationship with his slaves.

Most of the decisions made by Washington were based on what he considered well-founded empirical evidence. It became obvious to him after only a few years of tobacco-growing at Mount Vernon that his continued devotion to the crop was slowly breaking him. He correctly understood that the limitations of his fields as well as the system of trade which governed the price of the weed left him with little or no control over the course of his financial future. For a man with such passion for his farms and the lifestyle which they supported, this was simply unacceptable. The change from tobacco to wheat at Mount Vernon in the mid-1760s was thus an indication of Washington's dedication to financial responsibility and to greater command over his own destiny.

The merchants of London and Britain's other port cities provided Washington with an endless stream of distress. There were few things which roused his anger more than sharp dealing against him. In his mind, British merchants were twice getting the best of colonial planters. American farmers could control neither the price of the tobacco they shipped nor could they govern the price or quality of the goods they received in return. Without the luxuries of modern travel and telecommunications at their disposal, provincial planters found it almost impossible to exercise sufficient influence on British factors to force more equitable action. Never content to be taken advantage of, Washington was, after converting to the cultivation of wheat, in a considerably stronger position to negotiate prices and insure the quality of the goods he received. He was no longer obliged

to conduct business by transatlantic dispatch but could now simply travel the few miles to the town of Alexandria where much of the region's commerce was conducted, and discuss his transactions in person. His intentions and wishes would no doubt be perfectly understood.

In his relations with the plantation's white and black work force, Washington drew very heavily upon his military background. The master of Mount Vernon made it very clear to the plantation's black and white laborers, artisans, and overseers that he would condone neither laziness nor disobedience. Contracts drawn up between Washington and prospective overseers indicate Washington was insistent that they adhere strictly to his instructions and behave in a prudent and productive fashion. These agreements also indicate that Washington demanded of his slaves a similar responsiveness to his directives. Unlike some masters, however, Washington was largely opposed to the use of physical coercion as a means of inducing productivity in his slaves. He was more inclined to sell any slave that resisted work or confinement on the plantation. Putting a slave repeatedly under the lash merely diminished his value, both in the bondsmen's own eyes as well those of any prospective buyer. A hostile slave population ruined productivity, promoted theft and destruction of tools, and fostered attempts at escape. It only made sense to Washington that he provide his laborers with adequate food, shelter, and medical attention. A relatively content slave population encouraged greater productivity, limited confrontation, and

permitted a more stable atmosphere to exist at Mount Vernon.

Jefferson's return to Monticello marked a new beginning in an already fascinating life. His education, position, and intellect brought him to the very center of the conflict with Britain, took him to France on the eve of its revolution, and elected him to two successive terms as the President of the United States. When he took up residence at Monticello in 1809, Jefferson was entering very unfamiliar territory. Called away by the business of colonial rebellion and later of representing and serving the new American government, Jefferson never spent more than a few successive years at a time in his central Virginia home. After March, 1809, he was compelled to deal with the debts incurred during years of public service, to address plantation problems that arose through years of neglect, and to find his place among the Virginia gentry. His financial condition at his death, while in part the result of successive seasons marked by inclement weather, was due in large part to his relative inexperience in farm management and the variety of interests which dominated his waking hours.

Jefferson was seriously handicapped in his efforts to operate Monticello and his other properties by the sheer weight and number of debts for which he was accountable. His farms, mills, and factories were thus forced to produce not only for day-to-day survival but also to satisfy the calls of creditors anxious for repayment. As desperately as Jefferson wished to be freed of the burdens of debt, he labored under a commercial

system which was similar in many respects to that which Washington had encountered some fifty years before. Jefferson usually found that the prices his crops fetched each year were almost entirely out of his hands. Irregular harvests and unpredictable prices made the management of Jefferson's farms little short of an administrative nightmare. However, aside from the brief change in location where Jefferson sold his tobacco, there were few instances where he took strong action to secure better treatment of his crops.

Jefferson's correspondence reveals a man wholly uncomfortable in discussing matters of money and finance. The operation of the nailery and mill are a testament to Jefferson's unwillingness to press his debtors for the cash he needed so desperately needed to keep his estate afloat. The Shoemakers were permitted to retain their lease on the manufacturing mill for entirely too long. Their poor management and failure to provide Jefferson with his just compensation were a financial drain which he could ill afford. At the same time, he had apparently little understanding of his fiscal condition. Scholars have recently suggested that the great exactness in record-keeping used by Jefferson permitted him to lose sight of his overall financial circumstances. In the pursuit of accounting for spent pennies and nickels, Jefferson was annually spending far more than his fields, shops and mills were

producing.¹

No small part of Jefferson's difficulties arose out of his unwillingness to limit his spending. While certainly poor harvests forced him to purchase corn and other commodities for the sustenance of his slaves and the rest of his plantation family, the massive investment of human and economic capital into the building projects at Monticello and Poplar Forest were at best ill-advised. In his study of Jefferson and his life-long construction venture at Monticello, Jack McLaughlin concluded that he possessed an aristocrat's view of money: that "it would somehow always be there."² It was only in late in 1825 and early in 1826 that Jefferson began to understand more fully the extent of his financial problems. By then, despite his efforts and those of his grandson, it was too late.

Perhaps the greatest obstacles to success for Jefferson were his own numerous interests. Even after his withdrawal to Monticello following his tenure as President, he retained his interest in politics. He frequently wrote James Madison and James Monroe when they were in office on topics ranging from domestic issues to affairs of foreign policy. Jefferson continued building and landscaping the great houses at Monticello and Poplar Forest. The greatest and most challenging project

¹Jack McLaughlin, Jefferson and Monticello: The Biography of a Builder, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988), p.378.

²Ibid.

that he undertook during his retirement was undoubtedly, however, the development of the University of Virginia. As one of the institution's leading advocates, Jefferson spent tireless days securing support, recruiting faculty, and overseeing its design. The construction of the academical village at Charlottesville became an all-consuming passion for Jefferson. At the height of his financial distress Jefferson was spending night and day fashioning the rotunda at the University. His priorities were entirely clear.

Jefferson's indebtedness prevented him from freeing his slaves. There is no indication, however, that he would have done so even if his finances had allowed it. Jefferson never believed that blacks and whites could peacefully coexist in American society. "Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained;" and many other circumstances were eternal barriers to cohabitation of the races in America. His advocacy of colonization was accompanied by his insistence on the fair and humane treatment of the slaves on his plantations. Jefferson, like Washington, guaranteed that his slaves were properly fed and cared for. Plantation discipline was also maintained at Monticello without widespread or frequent use of physical punishment. Edmund Bacon recalled that Jefferson "could not bear to have a servant whipped, no odds how much he deserved it." The care and disciplining of the slaves on his plantation was the means by which Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of

Independence and America's greatest champion of individual rights, could deal with the everyday complexities and injustices of black servitude.³

Washington and Jefferson, for different reasons, were two of the most extraordinary men of their age. The correspondence and diaries of the master of Mount Vernon reveal a man of considerable ambition, practicality, discipline, and thrift. Washington was a man entirely committed to the success of his farms, shops, and mill. He saw the growth and prosperity of his farms as a measure of his personal worth and position among his contemporaries. Washington abhorred mediocrity, despised wasted time or effort, and was incensed by anyone he felt lacked integrity or a sound set of business ethics. George Washington was a man who demanded nothing short of absolute honesty.

The seventeen years Jefferson spent in retirement at Monticello expose the man's strengths and shortcomings better than, perhaps, any other portion of his life. Despite his longing for retirement in the final weeks of his presidential administration, Jefferson was generally uncomfortable with the tasks he was confronted with at his Albemarle and Bedford County plantations. Jefferson was an exhausted man. His central interests had always been the law and politics and he was in many

³William Peden, ed., Notes on the State of Virginia, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972), p.138; James A. Bear, jr., ed., Jefferson at Monticello, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1967), p.97.

respects ill at ease in matters of farm management, collection of debts, and the operation of plantation industries. With his social position long secure, Jefferson did not exude the same commitment and conviction about his farms that was exhibited by Washington. He was in public and private life a man of ideas and theory. This, by very definition, limited the practical side of Jefferson so apparent in Washington. Nowhere else are the differences between the two more clear. It is plain, however, that Jefferson was an honest, generous, and compassionate plantation owner, business partner, and slave holder. Indeed, excessive generosity with his money and time proved to be one of Jefferson's central undoings.

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