

# Memory Travelers: Pilgrimage and Memory at Mount Vernon

Scott P LIBSON  
Indiana University

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## *Abstract*

Pilgrimage is fundamentally linked to memory. Scholars have presented compelling yet contradictory definitions of pilgrimage, identifying it in relation to communities or individuals, as linked to tourism or as its opposite, as about the journey or the place. None of the definitions work without accounting for memory. Places become sacred because believers link them to history. A forgettable journey could not be a pilgrimage, by any definition. Pilgrimage is fundamentally linked to memory and our understanding of history (i.e. our memory) is changing, so what does that mean for pilgrimage? That is the topic of this paper. I approach the question from the perspective of a historian. How has our changing memory changed pilgrimage? In particular, I focus on one of the most important sites of American civil religion, George Washington's plantation at Mount Vernon. Using historical and contemporary promotional materials, descriptions, and traveler accounts, I argue that pilgrimage and memory are dialogical, but that pilgrimage itself is more static than memory.

*Keywords:* definition of pilgrimage, memory, history, civil religion, American Catholicism, George Washington

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## **1. Introduction**

My talk today is about memory. Although pilgrimage is linked with memory in some fundamental ways, which I look forward to discussing, scholars have not explored those linkages as much as you might expect. The exceptions tend to focus on individual or collective trauma and only occasionally connect to institutional religion. Jill Dubisch (2004) and others, for instance, have written about the Run for the Wall, a motorcycle pilgrimage of Vietnam War veterans who traverse the United States before reaching the Vietnam Memorial. These veterans had returned from the war expecting a heroes' welcome, but instead found many Americans strongly opposed to the war. The experience had left them feeling bitter, so, decades later, they were riding across America to seek healing and to make peace with the country they had served. Sometimes the trauma extends beyond a single generation. Katharina Schramm (2004) has written about "pilgrimage tourism" in the context of trips to Ghana by descendants of enslaved Africans. Local residents treat the travelers as long-lost family members, and the pilgrims treat Ghana as both a promised land and a site

of massive trauma. The trauma could also be associated with an identity group rather than an individual or ancestor. Several scholars have made arguments connecting memory, pilgrimage, and national identity. Brad West (2008), for instance, interviewed Australian backpackers who were visiting Gallipoli on, what he calls, an “international civil religious pilgrimage.” West argues that pilgrimage revitalized, but also altered, the backpackers’ self-identification as descendants of both the colonized and colonizers, which allowed them to sympathize with the Turkish interpretation of the battle (see also Schäuble 2011).

Several years ago, the journal *History and Memory* devoted a special issue to violence, memory, and sacred space. In her introduction, Schramm (2011) emphasizes the ways that spaces shape and are shaped by the memories of trauma. Indeed, at my last Sacred Journeys meeting, two years ago in Prague, several papers touched on this topic. Roy Tamashiro spoke of his personal journey to Japan in connection with the trauma of nuclear war. Anne Blankenship delivered a paper on dark tourism and the trips to the sites of World War II-era Japanese internment camps in the United States.

The connection between memory and pilgrimage extends far beyond traumatic experiences. Simon Coleman (2004) has shown how the interplay between pilgrimage and memory has helped shape English national identity through Walsingham, “England’s ‘Nazareth.’” Many other scholars have similarly taken an interest in this connection with national or local identity, either implicitly or explicitly (Eade and Katić 2016; Greenia 2014; Janson and Notermans 2012; O’Brien 1999; Shovlin 1999; Sugawa-Shimada 2015).

One might wonder whether pilgrimage depends upon some sort of personal or institutional memory. In my own talk last time, I tried to make a case for an instance where that connection did not exist (i.e. discussing how Southern Baptists use the language of pilgrimage to talk about missionaries and particularly short-term missionaries). It was a stretch, as reflected in the feedback I received. If “pilgrims” or the institutions they represent have no memories (associations) with the pilgrimage site or trail, is it a pilgrimage? It is an interesting thought experiment regardless whether we emphasize the site, the journey, or the encounters in our definition of pilgrimage.

That is not my thought experiment today, though. Instead, I am interested in the consequences of altered memories. We know that memories<sup>1</sup> are never fixed and I’m curious about how changed memories shape pilgrimage experiences. I had originally planned to focus on a Catholic pilgrimage site in Massachusetts in relation to sexual abuse in the Church and Gettysburg Battlefield

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1 In Tim Ingold’s eloquent words, “Remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past” (Ingold 1993, pp. 152-53).

in Pennsylvania, but in the end, I chose to focus solely on a civil religious site with even deeper national significance than Gettysburg, namely George Washington's Mount Vernon homestead. Regarding the Catholic pilgrimage site, I concluded that such a brief talk (especially one presented by a non-expert) cannot do justice to this complicated and deeply troubling story.

My argument is one you may have expected, but I did not. As a historian (and not a historian of pilgrimage), I expected history/memory to define pilgrimage in some fundamental way and thus, for changes in how we remember events and institutions to reshape pilgrimage. To take a secular example, I expected that visitors to Gettysburg would imbue their experience with political significance stemming from the newfound attention to the violence and marginalization that Confederate memorials may inflict (or, from the neo-Confederate perspective, the renewed interest in honoring the Confederacy). I still suspect that to be the case in some instances, but at Mount Vernon the relationship between memory and pilgrimage was far more dialogical. The experience of pilgrimage and its attendant attributes (e.g. the journey, repentance, socializing, etc.) were often tools that responded to and helped shape memories.

## **2. Mount Vernon**

### *2.1. Mount Vernon as a Civil Religious Pilgrimage Site*

American civil religion<sup>2</sup> can claim numerous sites of pilgrimage around the world: Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, Gettysburg Battlefield, the cemetery at Normandy, Pearl Harbor, and numerous locations across Washington, DC. None, though, predate Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington<sup>3</sup>. Before the Civil War, before the construction of any of the monuments in Washington, DC, even before the Liberty Bell suffered its famous crack, Mount Vernon attracted visitors who spoke of the sacredness of the site and the profound impact it had on them.

I could offer any number of early examples. Instead of a well-known account, though (such as the celebrated return of the Marquis de Lafayette in 1824), allow me to tell you about the visitor who got me interested in this topic. In 1817, Elias Cornelius was on a fundraising tour across the United States for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. He traveled on horseback and in

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2 By which I mean the “symbols, actions, and ideas that purport to bind together groups of people,” in this case, American citizens (Gardella 2014, p. 5).

3 Of course, this ignores pilgrimage and pilgrimage-like traditions within indigenous American communities. The parameters of civil religion that I am employing here are connected with the idea of citizenship in the United States and I do find there to be a value in exploring the earliest civil religious site within those parameters even if “earliest” may be somewhat misleading.

stages for more than a year and a half on a round-trip journey from Andover, Massachusetts, to New Orleans. He usually stuck to his agenda, averaging more than one sermon a day plus constant house calls, but on a few occasions, he visited sites where he felt God's presence. Most were geological wonders, such as the cave system near Staunton, Virginia, or the natural bridge a bit further down the road. Among the man-made attractions, only Mount Vernon yielded the same reverence. In his diary, Cornelius commented on the "sacred dust which lies beneath your feet" while visiting "the tomb of the immortal man," whom Cornelius called the "Great Father of the American People." At the tomb, he "paus[ed] a few moments & contemplat[ed] with grateful recollection the deeds of that man, to whom under God I owed my freedom & a large portion of my current happiness." He also noted that one was "richly repaid" for the "trouble of making a visit" (Elias Cornelius Papers, 17 July 1817 diary entry).

Cornelius's visit and the thousands of other antebellum tourists were but precursors of the civil religious industry that soon grew around Mount Vernon (Brandt 2016). Bushrod Washington, the president's nephew and heir, still lived in the mansion when Cornelius traveled there and the gardener [possibly Phil Smith, an enslaved man, though Cornelius did not say (Casper 2008, p. 25)] personally escorted him around the grounds. Within a few decades, particularly after the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association (MVLA) acquired the site in 1859, the home became a veritable civil religious pilgrimage site, with many of the attributes typically connected with pilgrimage: associations with sacred space, transformational experiences, bringing people together in unique ways, a commercial infrastructure built around it (Badone and Roseman 2004; Eade and Sallnow 1991; Turner and Turner 1978). Of course, even in the early years after Washington's death, when travelers like Cornelius complained about the difficulty of getting to the house, this pilgrimage lacked the trials we associate with some pilgrimage journeys, like the Compostela trail. Cornelius rode from the city of Alexandria and returned that same day.

It would not be a good use of time to argue the merits of identifying Mount Vernon as a civil religious pilgrimage site. Nevertheless, let me point to a few pieces of evidence. First, from very early on, visitors explicitly used the term "pilgrimage" to describe the trip<sup>4</sup>. Scholars have similarly adopted this vocabulary to describe tourism to Mount Vernon (Brandt 2016; Casper 2008; Lee 2006). Second, the rhetoric of sacrality permeated descriptions of the site. Artifacts were "relics" (the MVLA even had a "Relic Committee" at one time), while visitors felt "reverence" and "paid ... devotion [or, elsewhere, "homage"] to the tomb" (Brandt 2016, p. 25; Johnston 1876; Lee 2006, p. 104; Mount Vernon website, "The Tombs"; Seaton 1941, pp. 46-47; Wendell 1899, p. 33). Tourists remembered the man as "immortal Washington," "Great Father," and "immortal chieftain" (Elias Cornelius Papers, 17 July 1817 diary entry; Lee 2006, p. 104; Snowden 1894, p. 15). Third, there has continually been emphasis on the unifying quality of the place, especially the fact that

Civil War soldiers met “here, and only here, ... as brothers” (Wendell 1899, p. 33; see also Mount Vernon website, “The Civil War Years”).<sup>5</sup> This emphasis underlines the idea of Americans as an “ideological community” somehow connected through the home of the first president (Greenia 2014, p. 69).

In claiming Mount Vernon as a civil religious pilgrimage site, I am relying on scholars who have argued for a thin line between pilgrimage and tourism and have tended to embrace the idea of secular pilgrimage (Reader and Walter 1993; Coleman and Eade 2004; Badone and Roseman 2004).<sup>6</sup> I am not attempting to persuade those on the opposing side, which avoids letting pilgrimage lose its traditional meaning and seeks a more precise definition of the term (Margry 2008). I am, of course, also relying on scholars who argue for the existence of American civil religion (Gardella 2014) and am not wading into that scholarly debate.

The American memory of George Washington has not changed as much as other figures from the Early Republic, notably Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson (Cheatham 2015; Gordon-Reed 2016; Kukla 2007; Nash and Hodges 2008; Wiencek 2012). Indeed, the question is not so much whether he is a heroic figure or the “father of the country,” but how he achieved it, whether by creating an image of himself as the preeminent gentleman (Longmore, 1988); by traveling around the country and staying in local inns, thus inspiring people to believe in the federal government (Breen, 2015); through the strength of his marriage to Martha (Fraser, 2015); or because he was “indispensable” as a commander-in-chief (Fischer 2015), an ex-commander-in-chief (Larson 2014), or a president (McDonald, 1974). He still regularly ranks as one of the top three American presidents whenever any organization surveys presidential historians, regardless of their political persuasions, and the general public undoubtedly has an even more favorable opinion (Rottinghaus and Vaughn 2018). Nevertheless, public and academic memory of the entire era has evolved, especially since the 1960s, with more focus on the sins and consequences of slavery (Einhorn 2006; Gordon-Reed 2008; Rediker 2007) and the role of the “Founding Mothers” in unifying the nation (Kerber 1980; Norton 1980; Zagarrri 2007) to name just a few. Within American popular culture, the shift is evident in the popular TV shows *John*

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4 “Doubtless the pilgrimage to Mount Vernon is yet in its incipient state” (Johnston 1876, p. 46). “Every pilgrim to that hallowed shrine” (Governor’s Message 1857, ccxli).

5 The website does not clarify whether white *and black* soldiers met peacefully at Mount Vernon. It only states that “free African-American employees [were] working on the estate through the war years.”

6 Much of this work relies on John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow’s edited volume (1991) argued for “the essential heterogeneity of pilgrimage” and challenged any “uniform definition of the phenomenon of ‘pilgrimage’” (pp. 2-3).

*Adams* (2008) on HBO or *Turn: Washington's Spies* (2014-2017) on AMC. Each presents female characters as essential to the success of the American Revolution, both the military conflict and the formation of a new government. Depictions of slavery seem to be less common in movies and films about the American Revolution, but widely acclaimed films like *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and *Django Unchained* (2012) have not shied away from the violence of slavery nor the agency of enslaved people.

Regardless of Washington's actual history in relation to American diversity, as the so-called Father of the Nation, one would expect public remembrance of him to follow changes in how we understand the entire era. For example, one might see interpretations of his role as a slaveholder as a reflection of the morally ambiguous birth of the nation (no pun intended) or emphasis on Martha Washington's role in helping to define early national policies or how enslaved people used the ideals of the Revolutionary War to demonstrate the contradictions at the heart of the new country. The historiography cited above does address these issues to some degree and Scott E. Casper (2008), in particular, has underlined the differing ways that black and white people remembered Mount Vernon in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see also Du Bois 1932). As my questions centered on the implications of changing memory for pilgrimage, my talk focuses mostly on the ways white Americans' interpretations of Washington have altered the civil religious cult that surrounds him. So I started to look at the evolution of tourist guides and visitors' accounts of Mount Vernon as well as the Mount Vernon website. Instead of great change, I found efforts to fit the traditional veneration of Washington into a modern recreation of the same.

## *2.2. Modernizing Mount Vernon*

Part of the effort to "modernize" the veneration of Washington arose through the new methods of transportation that helped people travel from Washington, DC, to Washington's home. Of course, the capital city quickly became a hub for civil religion in the nineteenth century and has only increased in importance with new monuments and museums. Within a decade of the end of the Civil War, a ferry boat was charging a dollar to shuttle passengers from the Sixth Street Wharf in the District to the Mount Vernon dock and back. Before the close of the century, an electric trolley line was installed, one of the first in the country. In 1892, the train brought passengers from Alexandria to Mount Vernon and a few years later from a station just steps from the White House. With the rise of trains and automobiles came consumer maps. The gasoline and public transit companies that produced the maps had a vested interest in encouraging DC tourists to get out of the city and travel to Mount Vernon.

As we know the journey is not just about getting from point A to point B and the same has been true for the journey to Mount Vernon. The trip to Mount Vernon

followed the life of Washington. Elizabeth Johnston's 1876 visitor's guide, for instance, noted that the steamship would pass by Alexandria where Washington attended church and the room where Washington appealed to Edward Braddock during the French and Indian War. The trolley similarly encouraged riders to stop by the sites in Alexandria associated with Washington.

### *2.3. Mount Vernon and Slavery*

The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association adapted the site itself to respond to changes in historical memory, though only slightly and only in ways that did no damage to the cult of Washington. In 1929, for instance, the MVLA placed a historical marker at a burial site for enslaved people. The marker recalled a harmonious relationship between slave and master, aligning with the portrait of slavery popular among white Americans at the time (a similar monument planned for Washington, DC, had passed the US Senate a few years earlier). It noted the "faithful colored servants of the Washington family" buried in "unidentified graves around this spot." In keeping with the mentality that sees no disconnect between calling someone a family member and then leaving the person in an unmarked grave, the MVLA quickly forgot about the marker and let the area get overgrown (Gilliam 1982).

By the 1950s, the MVLA had begun to acknowledge the importance of structures associated with slavery, such as the areas where enslaved people lived. In 1983, it installed a new monument, designed by students at Howard University, to mark the slave burial ground. That occurred following a Dorothy Gilliam column in the Washington Post that had publicized the MVLA's neglect of the burial ground. Gilliam recounted her discovery of:

A lone stone monument that marks the site where George Washington buried his slaves. It is a modest memorial, apparently too unimportant to be roped off or otherwise distinguished from the other parts of the property.

It seems not to matter that the hands of these men and women built the celebrated mansion that was Washington's home. It seems not to matter that these men and women provided the free labor on which the plantation operated. This absence of proper recognition is an atrocity that adds insult to the already deep moral injury of slavery (Gilliam 1982).

Gilliam's rebuke prompted immediate action, including a ceremony a few weeks later that received support from the local chapter of the NAACP. The lesson did not sink in deep, however. The new monument grew out of a court settlement after a challenge to the MVLA's tax exempt status and the instructions for the monument demanded that it "fit" the site and not focus on "the horrors of slavery" (Brandt 2016, pp. 194-96). The official handbook, a few years later, differed little from the 1965 version<sup>7</sup>. Each went on at great length about

Washington and his family, the gardens, the rooms and architecture, individual artifacts or pieces of furniture. Neither discussed slavery with any nuance. Near the end of the 1985 handbook and just before a section on the stables, a short section on “plantation life” described the “orderly arrangement” of the “well managed” and “self-contained community.” It was “a tribute to General Washington’s ability.” Quoting Washington without analysis, the book claimed enslaved people were “warmly lodged” (MVLA 1985, pp. 106, 109-10). The account devoted significant attention to Washington’s decision to manumit his slaves. It did not mention the ongoing confinement of the majority of enslaved people on the plantation, individuals whom Martha Washington had inherited from her first husband (as well as the descendants of the enslaved women). Nor did it mention that Washington kept his criticisms of slavery to himself.<sup>8</sup>

The current Mount Vernon website suggests that this evolution has continued to the present. In 2007, the MVLA built a replica slave cabin, which it incorporated into the Pioneer Farm area of the grounds (rather far from the mansion, though near the reconstructed sixteen-sided barn). Historical demonstrations occur in the area. A four-year exhibit entitled “Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington’s Mount Vernon” began in 2016. The exhibit is presented in the museum, away from the historic buildings. It claims to use 350 objects and documents to chronicle the lives of nineteen enslaved people. For several years, Mount Vernon has also regularly hosted a week-long residential program on “Slavery in George Washington’s World” for K-12 teachers. Another residential program focuses on “Martha Washington and the Women of the Eighteenth Century.”<sup>9</sup>

As suggested by the replicated slave quarters and the memorials, Mount Vernon has not ignored the history and legacy of slavery. Nor has it ignored the history of women, which was a concern from the start, though its presentation of Martha Washington has focused on the domestic sphere. The MVLA would likely respond to concerns about slavery being presented on the periphery and Martha in her wifely functions by noting its goal of recreating the world that Washington in-

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7 The minor “improvements” include changing how individuals were identified. “Frank was the butler, or steward” became “Frank Lee, a slave, and the son of Washington’s valet, William Lee, was the butler, or steward, and occupied quarters in the basement, where there was also a white servants’ dining room.” A section entitled, “The Service Lanes,” was significantly lengthened and became “Plantation Life.” (MVLA 1965, p. 70; 1985, p. 88).

8 One should not suppose that 1985 was too early to challenge the rosy picture of Washington the slaveowner. The first edition of Paul Longmore’s *The Invention of George Washington* had been published the year earlier. It received widespread attention, arguing, in part, that Washington had depended upon slavery to construct the self-image of himself as an eminent gentleman farmer.



habited (indeed, as noted below, that is at the core of its mission, specifically focusing on the year of Washington's death in 1799). The slave cabin's location replicated its place in the eighteenth century and without a separate exhibit in the museum, slaves' voices would have been drowned out by the Washingtons themselves. As a domestic residence, Mount Vernon lends itself to present Martha's domestic responsibilities. That response (perhaps a straw man I have created, but I doubt it) reflected the mentality of white Americans for hundreds of years and still reflects a disturbing tradition of distancing the blessings of wealth and power from the labor that made it possible.

As a civil religious pilgrimage site, Mount Vernon continues to glorify the memory of George Washington. The exhibit on slavery explicitly aims to help "guests gain a better understanding of Washington's changing views towards slavery, culminating in his landmark decision to include in his will a provision freeing the slaves that he owned" (Mount Vernon website, "Lives Bound Together"). Aside from emphasizing Washington's supposedly progressive views regarding slavery (which were actually quite ambivalent, with Washington's views of proper moral behavior conflicting with his desire for wealth and power, Ellis 2004, pp. 258-65), the exhibit attempts to achieve its objective through incomplete explanations. Overseers punished slaves for "misbehavior," according to the exhibit, ignoring the many random acts of violence that left enslaved people in terror of overseers. The exhibit references Tom, an enslaved man from Mount Vernon who attempted to escape and was sent to the West Indies. His likely fate (i.e. an early death, considering the brutal treatment of slaves in the region) is left unsaid, even though Washington's earlier trip to Barbados had made him well aware of what awaited Tom. In addition, although this episode occurred before Washington's supposed progressive turn, he continued to use the threat of sale to control his slave laborers until 1793 (Wienczek 2003, pp. 131-33). The exhibit attempts to thread the needle of keeping the image of the magisterial Washington alive without minimizing the lives of the people he owned.

The need to keep Washington a semi-divine figure has always been at the core of the MVLA's mission and is apparently what visitors desire. Azie Mira Dungey, who enacts an enslaved woman on the Mount Vernon plantation, notes that conversations about slavery are often fraught at the site, that "the ethos of the Founding Father seemed to blind some visitors from even seeing the history of slavery as meaningful to the site" (Tyson and Dungey 2014, p. 38). The MVLA claims to be "the first national historic preservation organization in the United States." It continues to own and operate the site. Its members each represent a separate state (not all states are accounted for and they change from time to time, but all regions are in-

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<sup>9</sup> Other programs focus on the Constitution, Washington as a successful businessman, and Washington as a leader.

cluded) and receive the title of “vice regent.” Members are elected for life. Not surprisingly, the initial composition of the MVLA was very homogeneous. Perhaps more surprisingly, that homogeneity persists today. All of the current members seem to be of European ancestry. All of them explicitly identify as married. One assumes their socio-economic background to be similarly uniform. Given that lack of diversity, it would surprise no one that the organization presents its history in a similarly monochromatic manner. Its website includes a long history with a beautifully interactive timeline, including dozens of images. Every portrait, including those of visitors, is of someone of European ancestry. References to slavery use images of the memorial stones or reconstructed buildings that slaves used. Perhaps naively, the MVLA continues to cite its first regent who claimed in 1861 that “we need not have anything to do with politics.”

### **3. Conclusion**

Pilgrimage persists even as memory changes. Indeed, pilgrimage even shapes memory. As Lydia Mattice Brandt (2016, p. 199-200) said, Mount Vernon is a slate upon which visitors express their views. In this regard, the MVLA has presented the site in the most expected manner possible, one that maintains the heroic status of Washington, the person for whom the association assumes everyone comes. A visitor is unlikely to want to build some sort of connection with George Washington the slaveowner who threatened to tear families apart. Better to focus on the more favorable parts of his biography, which are undoubtedly there as well. This perspective likely ignores the visitors who understand the troubled origins of the United States and would be happy to know that that history was not being whitewashed at Washington’s home. It is a sign of the power of pilgrimage, though, to see a danger in that new/old Mount Vernon. If you rebuild it, will they still come?

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