

George Mason and His Legacy

Gunston Hall

by

Dale Jones

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OVERVIEW

The title reflects a choice that visitors will make. Does George Mason’s legacy as writer of the Virginia Declaration of rights, inspirer of the Bill of Rights, writer of the Virginia Constitution, key figure in the Constitutional Convention, and outspoken advocate of stopping the slave trade override his legacy as a slaveholder?

Location: Gunston Hall Mansion.

- Scene 1 is in spring 1776 just before the Virginia Constitutional Convention in Williamsburg,
- Scene 2 is in fall 1787 after the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia

Characters:

George Mason IV is 50 and the wealthy owner of Gunston Hall, other plantations, and over 125 enslaved people. He is considered by his peers to be one of the most intelligent and knowledgeable men in Virginia. He much prefers life at home with his family than traveling or being an elected or appointed official. When his beloved wife dies in 1773, he becomes single parent of nine children. He often suffers from painful and debilitating attacks of gout. He fears corruption and abuse of people by government and wants to create a written declaration of rights to protect people. He is against the slave trade.

Nell is an enslaved woman 30s to 40. She works in the house and was a personal servant to Ann, before Ann died in 1773 after giving birth. Occasionally makes asides to audience with context, her “hidden” thoughts, or humor.

George Mason V is 23 and the oldest son of Mason. He is pro-slavery, doesn’t agree with some of his father’s beliefs. He is not particularly kind to servants.

The program will consist of four segments:

- An introduction, under the tree, in which Nell welcomes visitors, sets the context of scenes to follow, and poses a question;

- Scene 1, in Central Passage, spring 1776. George Mason V is persuading his father to attend the Virginia Convention, where he will draft the Virginia Declaration of Rights and the Virginia Constitution;
- Scene 2, in the Little Parlor, fall 1787. George Mason IV has recently returned from the Constitutional Convention and will oppose ratification of Constitution. His son tries to dissuade him.
- Conclusion, under the tree, in which Nell discusses with the audience what they have seen and poses them questions to consider.

GOALS FOR VISITOR EXPERIENCES

Through the experiences presented here, I hope to put visitors “in the moment” in two events in George Mason’s life. By understanding the background of these moments and hearing discussion of ideas significant to our democracy, we hope to give participants the opportunity to consider the value and importance of the ideas espoused by Mason. By seeing dramatic museum theatre performances, hearing the words of Mason and discussing implications of his ideas, visitors will develop a deeper understanding of the beginnings of our government and the ideas that continue to shape it today.

Goals for the experience are to have visitors consider:

- Mason’s legacy as writer of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, his impact on the United States Bill of Rights;
- Mason’s impact on writing of the Constitution and his opposition to it;
- Mason’s complex relationship to slavery; and
- Mason’s role as a family man and private citizen who has impact on his government

INTRODUCTION – UNDER TREE

NELL

GREETES VISITORS UNDER TREE. CHAT UP, THEN BEGIN WITH

Welcome to Gunston Hall, home of George Mason, his family, and over 100 enslaved people.

This is a really interesting site. Its mission is not to tell stories about George Mason, who was indeed an amazing man, or to show off the beauty of Gunston Hall, which is magnificent, or relate the stories of the enslaved people here, which are poignant and enthralling.

No, this is a site of ideas. Its mission is “to stimulate continuing public exploration of democratic ideals as first presented by George Mason in the 1776 Virginia Declaration of Rights.”

Today, for about 20 to 25 minutes, we are going to take a look at some of these ideas by recreating two scenes from the past: in 1776 and eleven years later in 1787, with people and ideas from this place. Then we are going to explore some of these ideas and get your thoughts.

The first words you see on the website, after Welcome to Gunston Hall, set the scene for us:

"That all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights..."

These are the democratic ideals we will explore – equally free and independent with inherent rights. I am going to pose a question to you at the end – and I want you to keep this in mind:

George Mason was a private citizen and a widower with nine children, and a plantation owner. He drafted the Virginia Declaration of Rights, an incredibly influential document that inspired our own Bill of Rights. He was a major writer of the Virginia Constitution and a key leader in the discussion and writing of the US Constitution. He also wrote and spoke publicly against the slave trade.

Yet he was a slaveholder with over 100 enslaved people, and upon his death he freed none of them.

Does George Mason’s legacy as writer of the Declaration of Rights, the Virginia Constitution, and an outspoken critic of the slave trade override his legacy as a slaveholder?

Today, to help you make a decision, you are going to meet George Mason, owner of Gunston Hall. In the first scene he is 50.

You will also meet his son, George Mason V, who is 23.



You've already met me. I am Nell, or Gunston Nell, or House Nell, and a servant, an enslaved woman. I'll be guiding you through our journey, and I may have some comments here and there for you.

The following scene takes place in spring 1776. Fighting with the British had already begun, and the Declaration of Independence would be written in just a few months. The Continental Congress has called on all colonies to form their own government, and George Mason is considering whether he should participate.

Follow me, please.

SCENE 1 – CENTRAL PASSAGE; May 1776

Time: Spring 1776 before Mason attends Virginia Convention

NELL

POSITIONS VISITORS IN CENTRAL PASSAGE, THEN EXITS TO CHAMBER

GEORGE V

ENTERS FROM PALLADIUM ROOM, LOOKS AROUND, SEES NO ONE. LOOKS IN LITTLE PARLOR, SEES NO ONE. SHAKES HEAD IN PUZZLEMENT. CALLS OUT IN NOT TOO FRIENDLY WAY)
Nell, Nell. Come here.

NELL

NELL ENTERS QUIETLY FROM CHAMBER, MOVES BEHIND GEORGE V.

Yes, sir. GEORGE V IS STARTLED AND JUMPS.

TO AUDIENCE

I can't help myself; I love doing that. I been doing it for years to young Master George.

GEORGE V

IRRITATED Nell, how many times have I asked you not to come up so swiftly on me? Now where is Father? He stepped out of the chamber a few minutes ago. Where did he go?

NELL

I do not know, sir.

GEORGE V

Well, find him.

GEORGE IV

VOICE OF GEORGE IV BOOMS FROM ABOVE AS HE COMES DOWN STEPS

Sorry, Son. I had some business to attend to that I had forgotten. HE CONTINUES DOWN STEPS.

NELL

I found him sir. SHE GOES OVER AND STANDS AGAINST HALL WALL.

GEORGE V

GLARES AT NELL

TO GEORGE IV Father, I have not finished saying to you what I must. First, however, pray tell me, how is your health?

GEORGE IV

Fine. The gout is taking a respite from attacking me. My feet and hands experience no pain, and I can write without problems. HE WIGGLES HIS FINGERS AS HE SAYS THIS. I am doing well, thank you. Son, I know you are interested in more than my health. What is on your mind?

GEORGE V

Now father, as I was just saying, there really is no one better suited than you to attend to our needs when writing the new Constitution at the Virginia Convention.

GEORGE IV

Nonsense. There are many who could undertake a trip to Williamsburg and sit through interminable committee hearings, listening to shallow people pontificate. The committees will be filled with overcharged, useless members.¹ You know how much I detest such gatherings. I prefer to stay here at home.

GEORGE V

You are right, as usual, father. Much better to let those shallow people declare our rights, create our constitution and lead us in the fight against the British.

GEORGE IV

MASON IV TURNS TOWARD HIM WITH WITHERING LOOK.
I get your point

GEORGE V

You must go – according to all to whom I speak, you have the best legal mind in Virginia. Only Gen. Washington himself is held in more esteem than you! I have also heard you speak fluently about our rights as British citizens, and about John Locke –

GEORGE IV

CUTS HIM OFF

You may as well mention the Magna Carta, and combine that powerful document with John Locke's writings and philosophy -- then you know the reason why we need a written declaration of rights.

GEORGE V

Yes, you have spoken of them often. One of your favorites is that we do not want, or need, a king or queen. Magistrates and officials should derive their power from the people, in elections.

GEORGE IV

Yes, exactly. The idea of a man born a magistrate, a legislator, or a judge is unnatural and absurd.²

GEORGE V

You have oft mentioned the need for a speedy jury trial.

GEORGE IV

And do not forget the need for separate legislative, executive and judicial branches.

¹ Broadwater Page 80

² Broadwater p 82

GEORGE V

See Father, you must go, if you want these rights and ideas included.

GEORGE IV

I have been giving this a great deal of thought recently. I fear we will create a government that does not honor our individual rights. We need to have a declaration of rights that is part of a constitution.

Listen to what I might propose – if I would decide to go. PULLS OUT PAPER AND READS

All Men are born equally free and independent, and have certain inherent natural Rights

GEORGE V

Did you say all men born equally free and independent? Surely you do not mean to give slaves the same rights? HE LAUGHS AND SAYS IN AMAZEMENT You cannot mean that. What about Nell, here? What about all the slaves we own? If they ever read that, if they could read, what would they do? Revolt? STARTS COUGHING
TO NELL Nell, bring me some water.

ACTION FREEZES AND NELL STEPS FORWARD

NELL

TO VISITORS This is the hardest part. They talk as if I am not in the room, as if I could not understand that they are talking about freedom – but not really for us – it’s for them.
SHE LEAVES TO GET WATER, TALKING TO HERSELF AND AUDIENCE.
Can’t read. Hmmp. Of course I can read. I can read the Bible well enough, but I ain’t gonna let them know that.

GEORGE IV

I know your beliefs are not as mine, but slavery is a slow poison which is daily contaminating the minds and morals of our people. This is what happens --every gentleman is born a petty tyrant and becomes practiced in acts of despotism and cruelty. We become calloused to the dictates of humanity and all the finer feelings of the soul.

GEORGE V

No sir, that does not describe you.
NELL ENTERS WITH WATER ON TRAY. GEORGE V TAKES WATER AND SAYS TO NELL:
Nell, would you not say that my father has always been a good master?

NELL

(TO AUDIENCE)

He has been good to me, and his late wife Ann was very kind. I know for a fact that she whispered in her son John’s ear just before she died “Be kind to the servants.” I was there.

But I also know that Master Mason is a slaveholder and owns more than 100 black people, including me. Master and Mistress Mason have been kind, but we still live in shacks, have little time for our own lives and families. I know that when one of his slaves stole a hog and escaped, he was caught and they nailed his ear to a pillory before they cut it off. I know that too. I was there.

So, in answer to Young Mason's question – SHE TURNS TO THE MASONS WHO HAVE BEEN STANDING STILL, NOT MOVING AND IGNORING HER AND SAYS
Yes sir, there is no better Master than Master Mason. He's good to us.

GEORGE V

There – you are a good master, like many others. Giving rights to slaves is not the answer and that's the end of the matter.

GEORGE IV

Tis not the end of the matter! Listen to what Patrick Henry has recently said: HE READS FROM LETTER:

Is it not amazing that at a time when the rights of humanity are defined and understood with precision, in a country, fond of liberty, that in such an age and in such a country we find men adopting a principle, slavery, as repugnant to humanity, as it is inconsistent with the bible, and destructive to liberty.³

HE IS ENERGIZED You are correct. I must go– to state my case, to oppose abuse and corruption in our government. PAUSES, ENERGY DROPS But I cannot.
This conversation had almost convinced me. If not for having nine children at home, I would attend. I cannot leave Gunston Hall.

GEORGE V

Father, tis only a few years since Mama died, and I know you have not gotten over it. But we are old enough to manage. Nell can help. She still knows how to run the household, just as she often did while Mama lived.

GEORGE IV

PAUSES. Ann -- Her irreparable loss I do, and ever shall, deplore.⁴ MAKES DECISION She would want me to go. TURNS TO GEORGE V. Thank you son for your advice and persuasion. I shall go and make my case. PUTS ARM AROUND GEORGE V Son, come with me for a walk in the garden. It's time for a quiet stroll.

HE EXITS WITH GEORGE V

³ Broadwater p 34 (quote by Henry used here as Mason's language.)

⁴ Ibid p 58

INTERSESSION – BETWEEN SCENES

NELL

TO VISITORS

Mason did go to the Convention, where he wrote the Virginia Declaration of Rights, which eventually became the model for the US Bill of Rights – and for the other states as well. He wrote the Constitution with James Madison. His desire to say "That all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights" was kept, except a clause was added – “when they enter into a state of society,” and it changed the whole meaning to exclude slaves.⁵

Now – here is where I need you to use your imagination. Fast forward 11 years to the fall of 1787. The Americans have won the war and their freedom. Mason played a critical role in keeping troops supplied.

Unfortunately, the government they designed – based on the Articles of Confederation -- did not work. There was no chief executive, no president, and the national government had almost no power. States got in disputes with each other – it was obvious something needed to be done.

So a Constitutional Convention was called. Mason was one of the key figures in the convention, but ultimately, he refused to sign the Constitution, bitter because of the rejection of some of his key ideas.

Follow me now into the Little Parlor, which is Mason’s office. It is 1787 and he has just returned from the Convention.

SHE LEADS VISITORS INTO LITTLE PARLOR, SHOWS THEM WHERE TO STAND, AND EXITS TO CENTRAL PASSAGE

⁵ Broadwater p 84