

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

July 4, 2026

George and Martha Washington & American Revolutionary People & Places Chez Nous

In celebration of the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, this newsletter explores nearby places, residences, and artifacts that link us directly to our founding.

Mount Vernon Everywhere

George and Martha Washington's residence has inspired more look-alike buildings than any other historic structure in America, notes architectural historian Lydia Brandt in *First in the Homes of his Countrymen* (2016, University of Virginia Press). Her work cites Alabama's Thornhill Plantation (1833), near Forkland; Auburn University's Old President's House, now Cater Hall (1915); and Washington Hall (1999) at American Village. Mountain Brook also boasts two 1920s replicas: the Wood House on Fairway Drive and the Tutwiler estate on Mountain Brook Parkway.

Brandt notes that not only the wealthy were building these copies of Mount Vernon. By 1932, anyone could order a pre-fabricated version of the first family's home through the Sears Roebuck & Company catalogue. The home's famed columned piazza built to overlook the Potomac was replicated in not only houses, but motels, banks, restaurants, college and exposition buildings, and funeral homes. Brandt's digital map of Mount Vernon replicas across the United States is found at <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/past-projects/is-that-mount-vernon>.



Mountain Brook's Model Country Estate (1927). Drawing by Jesse W. Green, July 18, 1927, *The Jemison Magazine*, September 1927, BPL Archives.

Landscape architect and planner Warren Manning traveled to Mount Vernon for inspiration and detailed his plans for the 10-acre estate he suggested to Mountain Brook's developer Robert Jemison Jr. in a letter of November 2, 1926. The suggestion featured not only the Mount Vernon residence, but its setting, garden, and grist mill. The developer built the house, garden, and "the Old Mill" along Mountain Brook Parkway

First Family Finery

The finest collection of Washington family memorabilia outside of Mount Vernon reopens on July 4th in its new installation at American Village. Opened in 1999 to share inspiring stories of our nation's founders with students of all ages, the American Village historical park today showcases more than 20 reconstructions of historically inspired structures and many interpretive adventures across its 188-acre campus. Current public programs include "The Independence Hall Experience," a guided interactive exploration of the fight for independence. Other opportunities abound to be a Colonial spy, ride with Paul Revere, or drill with Washington's army at Yorktown.

This Washington family collection includes almost 1,000 items purchased from Shelby County residents Eliza Parke Custis and Charlotte Smith Weaver, direct descendants of the widowed Martha Dandridge Custis Washington; from descendants of Augustine Washington Jr., George Washington's half-brother; and from Washington's nephew U.S. Supreme Court Justice Bushrod Washington, who inherited Mount Vernon upon Martha Washington's death. Karl Harrison, a Columbiana banker, purchased these family heirlooms that had been passed down through six generations of the family. For many years, Harrison opened this collection to the public at the Columbiana library and later at a museum named for its donor. The collection contains artifacts from the Colonial period through 1865.

Items in the Harrison collection encompass paintings, letters, furniture, porcelain, coin silver utensils, jewelry, and busts, as well as Martha Washington's 1783 prayer book, her tea pot and writing instruments, a 1787 sketch of the Mount Vernon grounds, a letter to President James Madison, and the correspondence of a British general defeated at Yorktown. At American Village, the collection of Washington family heirlooms will be housed in a specially built expansion of Independence Hall.



Washington Hall (1999), American Village, Montevallo. Carol Highsmith, 2010.

At Home with the Washingtons



Martha Washington's Great Cake

A "great cake" was commonly served at weddings during the Colonial era. The rich, dense fruitcake also appeared on holiday tables along with other rich desserts as they had for centuries in Europe. The legendary hostess of Mount Vernon served this cake for her wedding anniversary each year on January 6, the Twelfth Night after Christmas. While she probably never made the cake herself, she passed the receipt, as Colonial-era recipes were known, on to her granddaughter, Eleanor Parke Custis, upon her marriage to Lawrence Lewis. The latter wrote it down in a manuscript that was later published as *Martha Washington's Booke of Cookery and a Booke of Sweetmeats*.

The original recipe called for 40 eggs, 4 lbs. sugar, 4 lbs. butter, 6.6 lbs. flour, 5.5 lbs. currants, nutmeg, mace, brandy, and wine. Baked for 5 1/2 hours in a hearth, the cake served 40 people. Culinary historian Nancy Carter Crump created this modern adaption of Mrs. Washington's "great cake" for the book *Dining with the Washingtons*.

Directions:

Combine currants, orange peel, lemon peel, and citron in a large bowl. Add 1/2 cup of Madeira, stir to combine. Cover with plastic wrap and set aside for at least 3 hours or as long as overnight.

Stir the remainder of the Madeira together with the brandy and cover and set aside.

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees F. Grease and flour a 10-inch tube pan.

Drain the fruits in a large strainer set over a bowl, stirring occasionally to extract as much Madeira as possible. Add the strained Madeira to the set-aside Madeira and brandy.

Combine 1/4 cup of flour with the fruit, mix well. Add almonds, set aside. Sift the remaining flour with the nutmeg and mace.

In the bowl of an electric mixer, cream the butter until light. Add sugar, 1/4 cup at a time, beating for several minutes after adding each ingredient. Whisk the egg yolks until light and smooth and add them to the butter and sugar. Continue to beat for several minutes until light and fluffy.

Alternately add the spiced flour, 1/2 cup at a time, and the Madeira and brandy, beating until smooth.

In a separate bowl, beat the egg whites to form stiff peaks. By hand, gently fold them into the batter, combining lightly until well blended. By hand, fold in the fruits in thirds, mixing until well combined. Pour the batter into the prepared pan, smoothing the top with the back of a spoon.

Bake for about 1 1/2 hours, or until a wooden skewer inserted into the center comes out clean.

Set the cake on a wire rack to cool in the pan for 20 minutes. Then turn the cake out to cool completely.

Martha Washington's Great Cake

- 1 1/2 cups currants
- 1/2 cup chopped candied orange peel
- 1/3 cup chopped candied lemon peel
- 1/3 cup chopped candied citron
- 3/4 cup Madeira, divided
- 1/4 cup French brandy
- 3 cups all-purpose flour, sifted
- 1/2 cup slivered almonds
- 1/2 tsp. ground nutmeg
- 1/2 tsp. ground mace
- 3/4 cup unsalted butter, softened
- 1 1/2 cups sugar
- 3 large eggs, separated
- 3 large egg whites at room temperature



Washington family furnishings, portraits, china, and silver at the Karl C. Harrison Museum of George Washington in Columbiana, Shelby County. They are soon to be on permanent exhibit at American Village.

George & Martha Washington Dental Letters at UAB

It is well documented that the first U. S. president, George Washington, struggled throughout his adult life with tooth decay, gum disease, and other painful dental issues. In fact, by the time he became president in 1789, only one of his original teeth remained. However, contrary to popular tales, Washington's false teeth were not made of wood, but were constructed of other materials, including human and animal teeth as well as ivory and metallic components ("The Trouble with Teeth," George Washington's Mount Vernon website).

The Reynolds-Finley Historical Library (RFHL), a part of the Historical Collections of UAB Libraries, holds a collection of Washington letters, including two letters written by George Washington, and one by his wife, Martha, to three different dentists. The letters were purchased in 1965 by a group of alumni from the UAB School of Dentistry called "The Century Club," and donated to the library where they remain popular display items for visitors, exhibits, and classes.

The earliest letter in the library's collection was written on April 11, 1783, from Newburgh, New York, the headquarters of the Continental Army during peace negotiations following the Revolutionary War. Here he wrote to his dentist, Dr. Baker in Philadelphia, requesting plaster of Paris for making a mold of his teeth so that Baker could make him a new set of dentures.

Another letter was written to Dr. John Greenwood, who created four sets of dentures for Washington throughout his presidential years and until his death in 1799 ("John Greenwood," George Washington's Mount Vernon website).

Greenwood also made alterations to these false teeth as requested by Washington. These requests are evidenced by the library's letter of July 1, 1792.

Understanding her husband's struggles, Martha Washington was particularly attentive to her own teeth and those of her children. Nevertheless, by at least 1799 she also required dentures, as documented by the library's letter asking her dentist, Mr. Whitlock, to make her some new teeth that are "something bigger and thicker in the front and a small matter longer... as those she has is almost broak." The Reynolds-Finley library's letter is also quoted on the Mount Vernon website as proof of her use of dentures.

To view the library's letters, contact RFHL Curator, Peggy Balch, at pbalch@uab.edu, or view them online through the UAB Libraries Digital Collections. They will also be highlighted in the upcoming "House Calls to Hospitals" exhibit in the Dennis G. Pappas Historical Collections Gallery on the 2nd floor of Lister Hill Library of the Health Sciences beginning in September 2026. The gallery is open to the public Tuesday through Saturday from 12:00-5:00 pm.

—Peggy Balch, Curator, Reynolds-Finley Collection, UAB Libraries.

Revolutionary War Veterans Who Settled in Jefferson County

Alabama was frontier land during the Revolutionary War. From 1831 to 1840, sixteen residents of the county did receive pensions for their service. While at the close of the war many veterans received warrants for land, this land was most often in the West. After 1848, veterans who came to Jefferson County became eligible for this land (often termed bounty land). In 1855, the 97-year-old veteran William Speer (or Spear), who had not previously requested a pension as he had not wished to be regarded as "under the necessity of being supported by the federal government," filed for bounty land. Evidently his property, "having been placed in hands that squandered it," occasioned needed support for his declining years.

Jefferson County Revolutionary War Pensioners

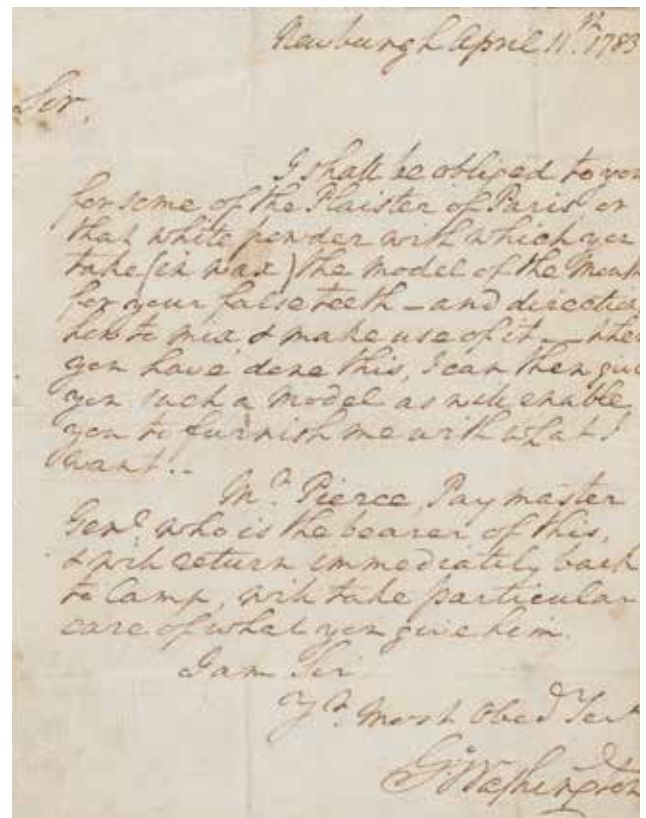
Private James Boyd	Michael McCarthy	R. S. Shepherd
Private John Brown	John McDonald	William Enoch Speer
Sergeant John Burford	Leonard Miller	Private Nicholas Starnes
John Click	Private Hugh Morrow	James Tarrant
Private Thomas Goode	Private Hugh Pierce	
Goldsmith W. Hewitt	Lieutenant William Pullen	

A Bit About a Veteran

William Pullen served for seven years in several Virginia regiments, including service under General George Washington during the long winter at Valley Forge and at major battles. He came to Jefferson County in 1820, lived in the vicinity of today's Avondale neighborhood, and in 1845 became the first veteran to be buried here with military honors. The 73-year-old Pullen applied for a pension in 1830:

"I am the owner of one-half quarter section of land which is worth about 100 dollars. I own one horse worth twenty-five or thirty dollars and thirteen head of cattle worth sixty or seventy dollars together with some different farming tools. My occupation is that of a farmer which I am but verily able to persue. I have but one person in my family my wife aged sixty-five years who is very infirm. I have no debts due to me exceeding the value of \$5 & have no debts nor have sold any property since the year 1818 except the small proceeds of my farm nor has there been any arterial changes in my property in that time.

— William Pullen, Sworn in open court, October 29, 1830.



ABOVE AND BELOW: Letter by George Washington to his dentist, Dr. Baker of Philadelphia, dated Newburgh, New York, April 11, 1783 and a transcription. Baker Historical Collections of the UAB Libraries, Reynolds-Finley Historical Library; UAB Historical Collections, UAB Libraries, courtesy Peggy Balch.

Newburgh April 11th, 1783

Sir,

I shall be obliged to you for some of the Plaister of Paris or that white powder with which you take (in wax) the model for your false teeth-- and directions how to mix and make use of it-- When you have done this, I can then give you such a model as will enable you to furnish me with what I want.

Mr. Pierce, Paymaster Genl., who is the bearer of this and will return immediately back to Camp, will take particular care of what you give him.

I am Sir

Yr. Most Obed Serv

G. Washington

Alabama Places Named for Revolutionary War Era Figures and Battles

Jefferson County, formed in 1819, carries the name of **Thomas Jefferson**, principal writer of the Declaration of Independence, founder of the University of Virginia, and third president of the United States.

Huntsville bears the name of **John Hunt** (1743-1822), a veteran who settled at the Big Spring in 1805.

Founded in 1819, the **City of Montgomery** bears the name of **Major General Richard Montgomery** (1738-1775), a Continental Army officer killed at the Battle of Quebec, the first major defeat of the war. In 1816, the Mississippi Territory Legislature formed **Montgomery County**, naming it for **Lemuel Montgomery** (1786-1814), an American military officer who died in the Creek War of 1813-1814.

Shelby County carries the name of **Isaac Shelby** (1750-1826), a hero of the resounding victory in the 1780 Battle of Kings Mountain, South Carolina, that became a turning point in the Southern campaign of the war.

Greene County and its capital seat draw their name from the 1781 Battle of Eutaw Springs, a vital Revolutionary War victory at which the highly skilled military strategist, Major **General Nathanael Greene** (1742-1786), forced the British out of the Carolinas and Georgia, and toward Yorktown.

Jasper named for **William Jasper**, hero of Sullivan's Island, killed at the Battle of Savannah.

Greensboro (Hale County) named in 1823 to honor General Nathanael Greene.

Concord (Fayette County) named after Concord, Massachusetts, site of the first battle of the war in 1775.

Carrollton (Pickens and Jefferson Counties) named after **Charles Carroll** (1737-1832), the wealthiest and longest-lived signer of the Declaration of Independence, from Maryland.

Baldwin County named after **Abraham Baldwin** (1754-1807), a Connecticut-born chaplain during the war who after the war moved to Georgia, becoming a signer of the U.S. Constitution and a founder of the University of Georgia.

DeKalb County, named for **Major General (Baron) Johann DeKalb**, the Bavarian officer who served with Washington at the battles of Trenton, Brandywine, Germantown, Monmouth, Guilford Court House, Eutaw

Springs, Camden (and actually at more battles than Washington). He died of his wounds from the Battle of Camden.

Elmore County, named for **John Archer Elmore** (1762-1834), a Revolutionary War Veteran from Virginia who served with Nathanael Greene in his tour of the Carolinas and was present at the Yorktown surrender.

Franklin County, named for **Benjamin Franklin** (1706-1790), printer, writer, scientist, inventor, statesman, and the only Founding Father to sign the three major documents establishing the United States.

Henry County, named for **Patrick Henry** (1736-1799), the Virginia planter, orator, and governor who help draft Virginia's Declaration of Independence.

Madison County, named for **James Madison** (1751-1836), a founding father, principal draftsman of the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and fourth president of the United States.

Marion County, named for **Francis Marion** (1735-1795), the South Carolina militia leader, nicknamed "Swamp Fox," for his hit-and-run attacks against British forces, who served as the inspiration for the 2000 film *The Patriot*.

Monroe County, named for **James Monroe** (1758-1831), Founding Father, statesman, and fifth president of the United States.

Pickens County, named for **Andrew Pickens** (1739-1817), an able commander of the South Carolina militia during the American Revolution, who triumphed at the battle of Cowpens.

Sumter County, named for Brigadier **General Thomas "Gamecock" Sumter** (1734-1832), a renowned Revolutionary War military leader known for his successful use of guerrilla tactics against British forces in the South Carolina theater.

Washington County, named for **George Washington** (1732-1799), surveyor, planter, Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, and first president of the United States.

Two **Revolutionary War battles** were fought in today's Alabama. Both were fought in Mobile in 1780 and 1781. Spanish forces under Bernardo de Galvez captured Pensacola in 1781, effectively ending British rule in West Florida.

Fort Morgan (Baldwin County) named for war hero **Daniel Morgan**, known for his victory at the Battle of Cowpens, South Carolina.

This granite boulder features a memorial plaque commemorating the service of the sixteen veterans listed in federal records as pensioners living in Jefferson County. The General Sumter chapter of the DAR (Daughters of the American Revolution) commissioned the memorial in 1912 and placed it in Five Points South. In 1957, it was removed to today's Linn Park.



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& American Revolutionary People & Places Chez Nous



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