



by Christopher Chadbourne

The fact was that contemporary visitors to Mount Vernon knew little about George Washington other than the myths of the cherry tree, wooden teeth and Washington throwing a stone across an impossibly wide river. The attention being given to Washington at all levels of education was declining. Focus groups revealed that people thought of him as great, --but kind of boring. And yet this was the same man that historians David McCullough and Joseph J. Ellis referred to as the “indispensable American,” - a man his contemporaries found handsome, daring, risk-taking, inventive and a visionary.

The goal of “Discover the Real George Washington” at the new Donald W. Reynolds Education Center was to bring this 18th century man of action back to life in a way that would make him relevant to contemporary visitors. It opened Oct. 27, 2006 and was made possible by a \$24 million donation by the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation. Located about 15 miles from Washington DC, since the mid 1800s the 50-acre estate on the site of George and Martha Washington's former home has been owned and operated as a heritage destination by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. It receives about 1 million visits annually and is open 365 days a year. The new education center is part of a recent \$110 million expansion. Here, the character and actions of the man are revealed in dramatic fashion using state-of-the-art technology and classic display techniques,

## Award for Outstanding Achievement Discover the Real George Washington

### *potomac powerhouse*

embedded appropriately in a creative and powerful storyline.

The approach was developed by Jim Rees, Executive Director of Mount Vernon (who likes to refer to Washington as “the country's first action hero”), his educational staff headed by Ann Bay, and the exhibit design team of Christopher Chadbourne & Associates, Museum Design Associates, and Dennis Earl Moore Productions. One goal was to deconstruct George's physique as well as his character, through forensic science coupled with a scrutiny of available physical evidence and paintings and writings by and about him during his lifetime. Starting with a Houdon life mask made of Washington during his presidency, some of the leading researchers and forensic specialists in the world were brought in to re-create what he would have looked like as a 19-year-old surveyor, 45-year-old Revolutionary War General and 57-year-old President. (This investigation would later be made into a History Channel special.)

Visitors descend into the underground building from the sheep pasture on the estate, which was restored to its historic profile after construction. To their left they see a three-dimensional sculpture of Washington's head all of 6 \_ feet high. Dramatically lit, it appears to be a positive cast sculpture whose eyes follow you. Only as you get a few steps away do you realize that it is a reverse mask, and that you are inside George's head—which is exactly where the story begins.

The first gallery, designed as a forensics lab, reveals the tools, modeling techniques, casts, books, articles of clothing, and other artifacts that were part of the deconstruction and reconstruction of our founding father. A video on a ceiling-suspended monitor delineates the process. The set-up now in place, visitors proceed to the Young Virginian gallery, which uses overhead animation to trace Washington's character-building youth. Young George walks along a 26-foot-long curved screen by means of a rotating



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Christopher Chadbourne is President and Creative Director of Christopher Chadbourne & Associates (CCA), an exhibit design firm based in Boston. Clients include the Smithsonian, Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, the state museums of Louisiana & North Carolina, the national museums of the Marine Corps, Infantry & Law Enforcement, the Grand Canyon & Yellowstone Park, and the US Institute of Peace Education in Washington, DC.

projector. Visitors confront the myth of the cherry tree, observe the deaths of his father and brother, and learn of his ambition to rise in society. The gallery ends with the first forensic figure—Washington at 19, a surveyor of western lands—his eye already on accumulating land and wealth.

The Upstart Colonial Officer gallery traces Washington through the French and Indian War. Illuminated maps provide context. (Levers styled as quill pens throughout the exhibits challenge visitors with questions and surprising answers, while other manual interactives put visitors in Washington's shoes at key junctures of his life and let them compare their judgement to his.) The Gentleman Planter gallery illustrates Washington's return to Mount Vernon, where he established himself in society and ultimately became a revolutionary. Martha's replica wedding dress is a popular exhibit and reveals the entry to The Forty Year Romance Theater, which features an emotional film, narrated by Glenn Close, on George and Martha's long and devoted marriage.

As visitors progress through 17 galleries and theaters, carefully selected quotations of Washington drive the narrative. Text is kept brief and focused on the events that shaped his character - and how his character helped shape events. We discover that George Washington's youthful, brash confidence occasionally got him into trouble; that he learned from his mistakes; that he was one of the most successful agricultural entrepreneurs and businessmen in the colonies. We learn that he experimented with cross-breeding and introduced the mule, crop rotation, and numerous plant hybrids to America; that he sought the leadership of the Continental Army; that, when away, he corresponded daily with Martha. We learn that he released his slaves upon his death; that he was beseeched by his officers at war's end to overthrow the government and assume the powers of a monarch; that the Constitution is vague regarding many of the powers of the Presidency because the writers assumed Washington would be that President and establish his own precedents; that he did so and that many of those precedents remain in effect today.



Care was taken to neither fawn over Washington nor exaggerate his accomplishments, nor pander to the tastes of popular culture. Slavery is handled evocatively and honestly. A soundscape recitation of Mount Vernon slave names and occupations is accompanied by a display of tools they used, and interviews with historians and descendants of Washington's slaves. The ultra-famous false teeth do get something of the royal treatment in a gallery all their own, titled *A Leader's Smile*. The teeth (which are not wooden) are embedded in a rotating circular case and accompanied by a chronology of when he lost each tooth, and a video on period dentistry. They speak to the considerable physical pain and discomfort with which Washington coped daily.

"Discover the Real George Washington" displays a broad range of old and new technologies aimed at engaging visitors of all ages and encouraging a family audience. They range from simple graphics and push/pull interactives to dioramas and cast figures, a life-size Pepper's Ghost illusion, select iconic artifacts, and infinity boxes that portray the forces allayed against the ragtag Revolutionary army. They include linear storytelling (14 History Channel videos) docent stations, hands-on activities, computer interactives and state-of-the-art theatrical presentations. The Washington Post wrote, "...the museum succeeds in presenting video and film in innovative ways that will seem natural and in tune with visitors weaned watching images on their plasma screens, Blackberrys, and cell phones."

"You can lick snowflakes off your face and squint through a rolling fog as you cross the Delaware with General George Washington.... The effect is exhilarating," wrote Washington Post critic Desson Thomson of the Revolutionary War Theater. This 110-seat, 4-D multimedia theater is one of the highlights of the guest experience. It utilizes two huge, custom projection surfaces and in-theater effects such as lighting, fog, snow, and rumbling seats to present a 14-minute survey of the war in ultra-high-definition video. The rectangular background screen carries the military action that the oval-shaped front screen elucidates through animated maps and historical documents. "It's as if you're watching the American Revolution from Washington's own strategy table," wrote Thomson.

The circular Legacy Theater presents a high-def video montage featuring quotes about Washington from prominent Americans such as David McCullough and Colin Powell, alternating with well-known American symbols and touchstones, in a 13-projector wraparound format. This dramatic final exhibit is meant to stir visitors and inspire them to reflect on Washington's legacy and his contribution to our history and culture.

"Discover the Real George Washington" was reviewed by Time, the New York Times, USA Today, the Washington Post, Washington Times, Museum Magazine, AARP Magazine and over 150 other publications worldwide. It has been featured on the ABC Evening News, Today Show, CNN, NPR, C-SPAN, the History Channel, and PBS. Mount Vernon's educational programs help connect communities to "Discover the Real George Washington" by way of a series of virtual programs and teacher workshops. The Distance Learning Center broadcast its inaugural program, hosted by Pulitzer Prize-winning author David McCullough and award-winning journalist Cokie Roberts, to 12 million students on opening day.

