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Home Fires of Mount Vernon

Paulena Nickell
Iowa State College

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Home Fires of Mount Vernon

Dr. Paulena Nickell brings the Washingtons
to life in the story of their domesticities

STRETCHING across the abyss of more than a century and a half between the time of the Washingtons and the present day are problems common both to the homemakers—Martha and George—and to our present-day families. Some of their problems, child training for example, ring decidedly modern in their importance.

The problems of the farmer, George, and the homemaker, Martha, are quite closely interlaced, bringing about the contribution of Martha Washington to the farm and that of George Washington to the home.

When Washington was settled in his office, he introduced strict economy into his household, which was preserved to the end of his public life. The regime was under the care of a steward, to whom he gave general directions. Others connected with the establishment were accountable to the steward, though each was required to keep track of the purchases and expenditures made by him down to slightest particulars.

Washington received accounts, along with tradesmen's bills, once a week and inspected them carefully, finally approving them with his own signature. Thus he could at any moment ascertain his financial condition and guard against extravagance and waste.

Social life at the capitol had the same simplicity as that of Mount Vernon. On Tuesday Washington had callers and on Friday Mrs. Washington received, at which time the President was usually with her. A Morristown lady who described Mrs. Washington's simplicity said: "As she was said to be so grand a

lady, we thought we must put on our best bibs and bands. So we dressed ourselves in our most elegant ruffles and silks, and were introduced to her ladyship. And don't you think we found her knitting with a specked apron on! She received us very graciously and easily, but after the compliments were over she resumed her knitting."

From the first, young Mrs. Washington assumed her share of the responsibilities at Mount Vernon. Together she and Washington worked in all phases of homemaking at Mount Vernon, which they considered their real home.

The household activities were simple and dignified, yet showed careful thought and scheduling. The Washingtons lived by regularity. Breakfast at seven, dinner at three, tea at seven, supper at nine. Exactly at nine o'clock the servants called the group together, and the family sat at the table until ten o'clock when they retired to their respective apartments.

This regime Washington followed strictly, and he did not tolerate tardiness in any form. He said that his servants served at the hour designated and the meal was never late. Such regularity did not, however, discourage strangers and friends alike from partaking of Mount Vernon hospitality. The doors of the house were always open and all historical indications show a continuous stream of visitors.

Both the Washingtons rose early to look after their duties for the day. Mrs. Washington would carry her keys at her side and make frequent visits to the various apartments. Neatness, order and industry were necessities in her house, as they were on her husband's farm.

Besides managing the Mount Vernon household, Martha supervised the spinning of yarn, the weaving of cloth and the making of clothing for the family and for the great horde of slaves. During the Revolutionary War and the non-import days that preceded it, she had as many as 16 spinning wheels in operation at once. A special spinning house, well equipped with looms, wheels, flaxbrakes and other machinery housed the work. Wool, flax and sometimes even cotton were produced upon the place and there they remained until made up into the finished product. Martha personally looked after the making of cotton dresses striped with silk from the ravellings of old silk stockings and faded damask chair covers.

Washington took the responsibility of ordering the better imports from England which usually took the form of clothing for himself, Mrs. Washington and the two step children. Mrs. Washington's wardrobe received particular attention. Her husband also paid much attention to dress, not, however, as result of her influence. In one of the orders he sent to England, Washington added (as if fearing that fashion might be somewhat ignored), "If worked ruffles should be out of fashion, send such as are not."

The one sad note in the life of Washington was the absence of a direct heir. However, this disappoint-

(Continued on page 16)

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Biography of a Home Economist

A **HOMEMAKER** who is putting her Iowa State home management principles to use is Mrs. Zac Dunlap, formerly Mary Janet MacDonald, '37.

Mrs. Dunlap says her home economics training taught her how to organize her work and where to go for information and better ways of doing housework. "I learned so much about correct and economical methods in my classes, it would be impossible to enumerate the instances in which my home economics training has proven itself." Mrs. Dunlap took most of her electives in art and foods courses.

Mary Janet MacDonald didn't spend all of her college career in a foods laboratory, however, but took time out to reign as Harvest Queen, Bomb Beauty, Cadet Colonel and Veishea Queen. She was active in Dance Club, Veishea, WAA, Home Economics Club, YWCA, Health Council and Intramural Board.

As a homemaker Mrs. Dunlap spends her time looking after her husband, working at the city library and participating in the Gamma Phi Beta alumnae activities.

"My exercise consists mostly of walking down town after groceries," laughs Mrs. Dunlap. "That really is a contrast from tramping the Iowa State College campus." She insists that is the biggest difference between college and a homemaker's life. "I've always thought there would be time to do so many things after I got out of college, but I seem to be just as busy as ever," she says. "Of course it is sort of fun to be your own boss."
—Marjorie Thomas

Mount Vernon

(Continued from page 10)

ment was turned into joy by their step-children and later their adopted grandchildren. Washington gave their two sets of children loving care, matched by the devotion of their mother and grandmother. George also had 22 nieces and nephews, and Mount Vernon echoed the laughter of young people during practically all the 40 years of the Washingtons' married life.

The discipline and instruction of the children in their early years was entrusted to Mrs. Washington. When the young people reached their teens, it was felt they then could discuss intelligently the problems of their future and comprehend the duties of their approaching adulthood.

Washington's contribution to the children at this time was largely a deep understanding of the temperament and disposition of youth. He showed inexhaustible patience when dealing with their mistakes and failures, and he possessed a frank eagerness to have them understand that both his praise and his rebukes flowed from his love of them and his ambition to see them develop into successful men and women.

This brief glimpse into the life of the Washingtons in their home reveals a family in which the two together faced and solved the many problems daily confronting them. Thus their contribution to society has not only been through the public life of the man, but the home life of the two—woman and man—Martha and George Washington, the homemakers.