

GEORGE WASHINGTON HOUSE

BARBADOS



George Washington House,
Barbados

The young Washington reads a letter in this audiovisual re-creation in George Washington House.



The interpretation in George Washington House includes an extensive display on the system of slavery in Barbados, which endured until the mid-1830s.
Photos: Roslyn Russell

His visit lasted only two months, but it was the only time that the future first President of the United States of America ever left mainland North America. George Washington brought his sick brother, Lawrence, to the Caribbean island of Barbados in 1751 in an (unsuccessful) attempt to cure his tuberculosis. The brothers lived, while in Barbados, in what later became known as Bush Hill House, beside St Ann's Garrison on the outskirts of the island's capital, Bridgetown. Now it has been restored as a house museum, George Washington House, and interprets the period of the Washingtons' visit, contextualising their stay in terms of the island's economy and society, and above all, its system of slavery.

Two crucial things happened to George Washington in Barbados. He contracted smallpox and recovered; and he witnessed at first hand the full extent of the system of plantation slavery in a British colony where its oppressive nature was most vividly demonstrated. Barbados had a reputation as a 'killing field', where slaves were literally worked to death to produce the wealth that created some of the greatest fortunes of Georgian England.¹

The small dose of smallpox Washington suffered in Barbados actually stood him in good stead: it gave him lifetime immunity from the dreaded disease. Slavery was a more complicated issue for Washington. As a southern gentleman, he was, as were many of the Founding Fathers of the United States, a slave owner, and he and his family benefited from the labour of slaves all their lives. Nevertheless, he directed that, once his wife Martha had died, 'it is my Will & desire that all the Slaves which I hold in my own right, shall receive their freedom.'² Washington's attitude to slavery was ambivalent: did the scenes he witnessed as he rode on horseback around the plantations of Barbados plant the seed that led to this act of liberation at the end of his life?

A visit to George Washington House begins with a video presentation on his 1751 visit with Lawrence to Barbados. It shows the brothers sailing to the island, landing, and meeting

members of the white plantocracy. In the video Washington is shown riding down alleyways of sugarcane cultivated by slaves. Once inside George Washington House, visitors are shown the downstairs rooms and the kitchen, fitted up to represent the domestic surroundings the Washington brothers would have experienced during their stay. There is also archaeological material excavated from a gully behind the House.

The upstairs floor houses interpretive displays on the Washington brothers and their visit, the Barbadian economy and, of course, the system of slavery George Washington saw in operation in Barbados. The Washington connection with Barbados is only one of many between the island and the United States, and other links are developed here. There was frequent trade when both were part of the network of colonies in the British Americas. There was also migration from over-populated Barbados to North America, where migrants settled on the eastern seaboard, particularly in the Carolinas. Texas also boasts Barbadian connections: Austin, Texas was named after a Barbadian; while the Maverick family, whose name has entered the language, is also of Barbadian origin.³

The restoration of George Washington House, supported by the Government of Barbados, was assisted by American sponsors, designers and by heritage experts at Colonial Williamsburg. It succeeds in its task of teasing out the connections between the first President of the United States – and the world superpower itself – with this small island in the Caribbean Sea.

This is the second in an occasional series on museums in Barbados by Friends Editor, Roslyn Russell, who also works with Barbados museums to develop exhibitions.

1 Henry Wiencek, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves and the Creation of America*, Pan Books, London and Basingstoke, 2005, p. 132.

2 Quoted in *ibid.*, p.354.

3 Sarah Venable, *From Bush Hill House to George Washington House: The Story of a Restoration*, Bush Hill Tourism Trust Inc., Barbados, 2007, p.21.