

# UNCOVERING GEORGE WASHINGTON'S "SECRETS"

by Jack Sullivan

Special to Bottles and Extras

If this were one of those supermarket tabloids instead of *Bottles and Extras*, the headline would scream, "First President Unmasked Making Moonshine."

Lots of folks over the years, including both Prohibitionists and whiskey-makers, have found it useful to impute secrecy to George Washington's distillery operations. The cover up, however, rapidly is coming to an end.

As I earlier reported to readers of *Bottles and Extras* (May 2001), Washington's distillery is being reconstructed from the ground up on a site near Mount Vernon, south of Alexandria, Va. Somewhat unexpectedly, the work has revived controversies that began more than 70 years ago.

## The Virginia Cover-Up

In 1933 the State of Virginia, as part of a Depression-era public works program, decided to restore George Washington's grist mill located in Fairfax County, not far from Mount Vernon. When the excavation and Washington's records revealed that a whiskey distillery also had occupied the site, Virginia authorities quickly re-buried its foundation.

Why? The most reasonable explanation is that this was the era of National Prohibition, when the sales of all alcoholic beverages were outlawed by Constitutional

Amendment. Moreover, Washington was an icon of the Drys. For many Americans, it would have been a severe shock to learn that our first President not only took a drink, but actually made the stuff. So this "secret" had to be covered over - and was.

Even today, some people find the distillery reconstruction objectionable. Mount Vernon curator Esther White notes that the staff has received several angry calls about the program. But the public vehemence could be nothing like the fervor generated in the 1930s. At that point, most Americans had been deluded into thinking that George Washington was a complete abstainer from alcohol.

## Washington: "Darling of the Drys"

The Founding Father was frequently (but only selectively quoted) in Dry propaganda. Just as important, one of the most popular and effective anti-drinking groups - a forerunner of Alcoholics Anonymous - was called The Washington Temperance Benevolent Society. Founded in Baltimore in 1840 by self-confessed former drunkards, the movement became a national one. The organization explicitly identified itself with George and Martha, and its members eventually became known simply as "Washingtonians." For a long time, The Father of His Country was clasped firmly to the Prohibitionist bosom.

In so doing, the Dry lobby conveniently overlooked (or ignored) Washington's August 16, 1777 letter to John Hancock as president of the Continental Congress. The Revolutionary War Commander wrote: "Since our imports of spirit have become so precarious I would beg leave to suggest the propriety of erecting public distilleries in different states. The benefits arising from moderate use of liquor have been experienced in all armies and are not to be disputed." Moreover, Washington also practiced what he preached. His account books for expenses during the Revolutionary War reveals that he spent significant sums to wine and dine his aides and other members of his entourage.

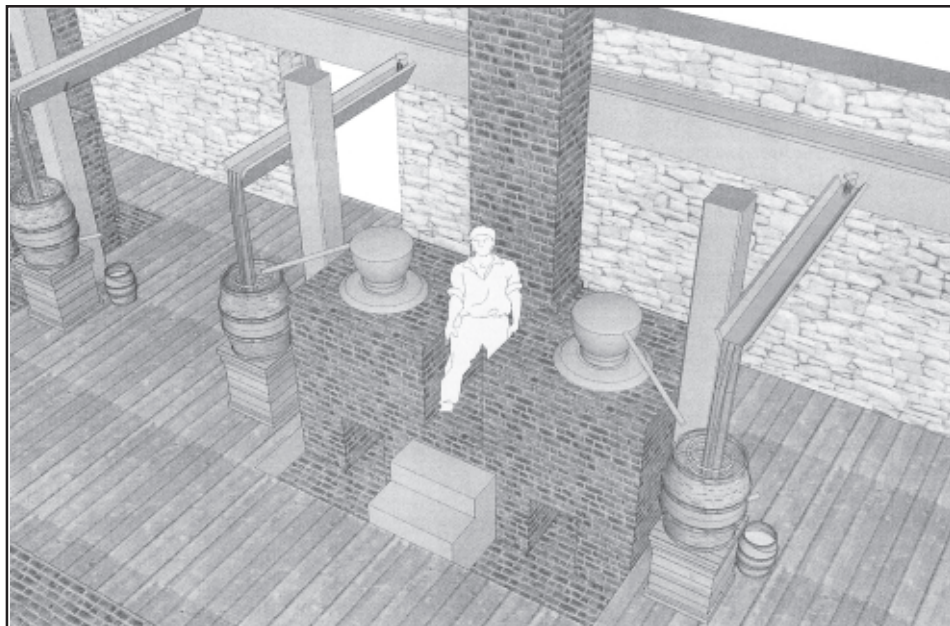
National Prohibition was still in full swing in 1932, when the State of Virginia purchased land that once had belonged to Washington, intending to restore the grist mill and other buildings at the site as a tribute to its native son on the bicentennial of his birth. In excavating it - as shown here.

## A State Of Denial

The discovery appears to have been leaked to a reporter for The Associated Press and the story was featured in newspapers from coast to coast. William Carson, the head of the Virginia State Conservation and Development Foundation, the agency



George Washington as depicted on a Pickwick Whiskey mini-jug.



An artist's rendition of the interior of Washington's distillery. [Courtesy of Mount Vernon.]



The distillery site in 1932 before being buried again.



Young archeologists working at the scene, summer of 2004.

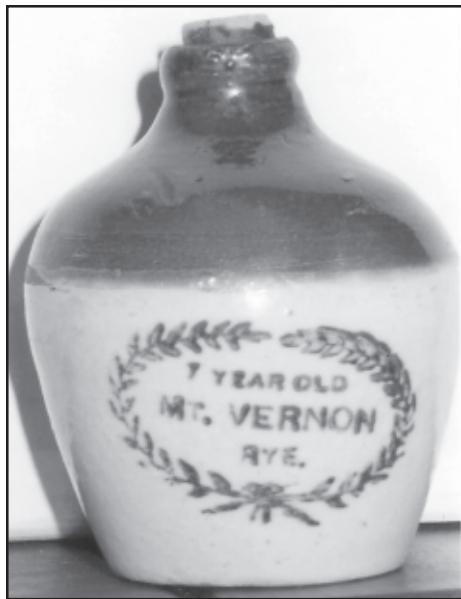
undertaking the project, appears to have taken some extreme heat as a result of the ensuing outcry. Carson was a political appointee and a good friend of then Governor John Garland Pollard.

Evidence uncovered by Ms. White includes a letter Carson wrote to a Texas publication denying any leak to the press and implying, quite disingenuously, that the distillery might actually have been a half-mile down the road rather than on Washington's property. Citing Carson's evasion as proof that the original story was untrue, the Texas journal thundered against "another infamous lie sent over the country by an element who would drag George Washington in the mire."

Chastened by such public outrage, and perhaps with limited funds for restoration, Mr. Carson and his Virginia state government minions decided that the path of least restrictions was once again to cover over the foundation. And so the site lay buried for seven decades.

### Exploiting Washington's "Secret Formula"

Once Prohibition ended, whiskey-makers got busy exploiting Washington's "secret" for their own purposes. Mount Vernon Rye Whiskey earlier had been a brand name from the Harris Distilling Company of Martinsburg, West Virginia. The company in its advertising, however, did not link its products explicitly with the Founding Father himself.



Mount Vernon Rye mini-jug from Hannis Distilling of Martinsburg, W.Va.

After the onset of Prohibition and the demise of Harris Distilling, the brand name came to be owned by the American Medicinal Spirits (AMS) Corporation. This outfit had been formed in 1927 by Col. R.E. Wathen from a combination of shut-down distilleries and

whiskey warehouses. It was headquartered initially in Jefferson County, Kentucky. Soon after its formation, another whiskey conglomerate, the National Distiller's Products Company, an outgrowth of the "Whiskey Trust" of the late 1800s, bought a controlling interest and moved AMS Corp. to Baltimore. When Prohibition ended, National Distillers owned 50% of the nation's whiskey stocks and many of its best known brands - including Mount Vernon rye.

National Distillers wasted no time in linking the whiskey to Washington. Shown here is a 1935 Mount Vernon Rye magazine

**ITS FORMULA WAS  
GEORGE WASHINGTON'S SECRET**  
... and ever since this distinguished Rye  
has been made to the same high standard

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S guests were first to praise the blend richness of the whiskey which today is famed throughout the English-speaking world as Mount Vernon.

But back in 1797 it was the private stock of America's first citizen, whose hospitality was notable for its excellence in all things.

Its formula was a secret between Washington and James Anderson, his chief overseer—at whose suggestion a distillery had been built at Mount Vernon to utilize the bumper rye crops grown on the rich Potomac bottom lands.

Anderson had learned the distiller's art in his native Scotland, and so in time a whiskey was matured that the master of Mount Vernon considered worthy of his house.

So palatable, so rich and mellow was this rye

that the General—who was a most practical business man—soon developed a ready market for his surplus among friends in neighboring states, and even overseas in England.

Washington's heirs continued to make it until nearly a century ago when the distillery was removed to Baltimore—but the original formula is still zealously followed.

It is from this great lineage—this 140 years of accumulated skill—that Mount Vernon Bottled in Bond Straight Rye Whiskey inherits its incomparable excellence.

**Mount Vernon**  
*Bottled in Bond*  
Straight Rye Whiskey—Distilled in Bond  
Under U. S. Government Supervision  
A Good Drink by Chief Whiskey

© 1935, The American National Spirit Distillers, Baltimore, Md.

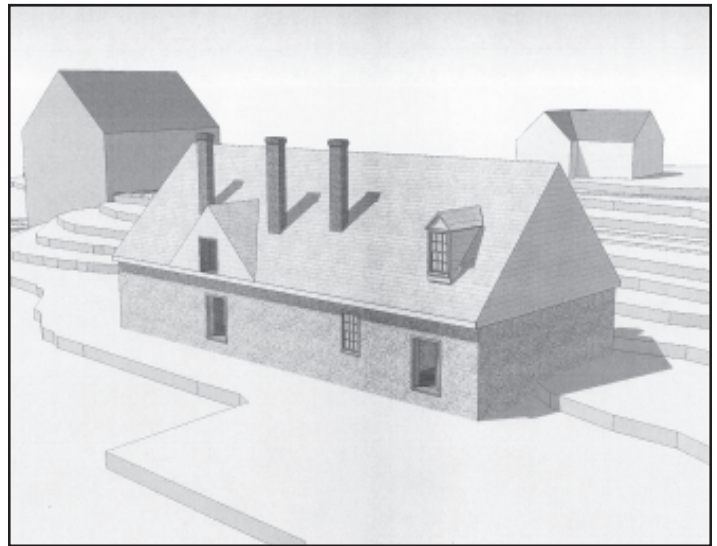
Mount Vernon Rye "secret formula" ad from 1935.

ad showing George Washington pointing to a barrel. It proclaims: "Its Formula was George Washington's Secret..." The small print makes a claim that the whiskey recipe was a secret between Washington and his overseer, James Anderson, to produce a beverage "so palatable, so rich and mellow..." The whiskey ad contended that Washington's heirs had continued to make this whiskey until 1835 when the distillery was moved to Baltimore, but the original formula was "zealously" followed: "It is from this great lineage - this 140 years of accumulated skill - that Mount Vernon Bottled in Bond Straight Rye Whiskey inherits its incomparable excellence."

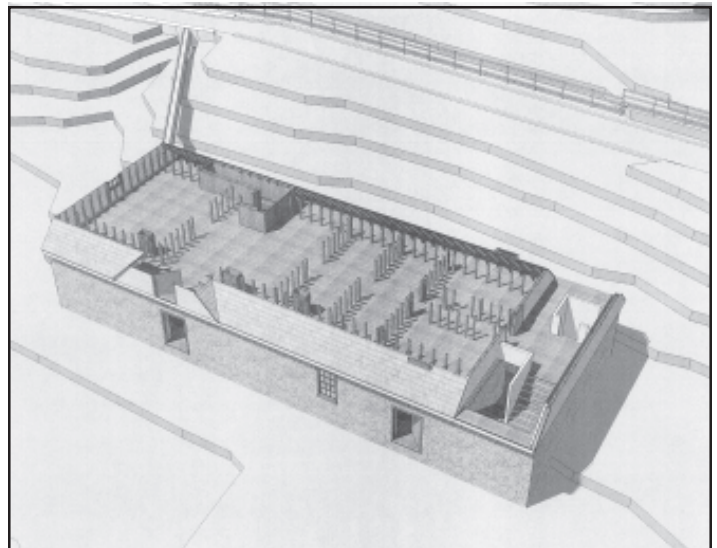
### The Truth of the Matter

This ad is almost entirely the product of some flack's imagination. Washington's distillery produced a whiskey much more akin to today's moonshine than modern rye. His product was not aged and anything but rich and mellow. Washington's heirs shut the distillery down several years after his death in 1799 and literally tore the building apart to recover the field stones. Nothing ever got moved to Baltimore. Finally, there was nothing secret about the formula. Anderson had learned distilling in his native Scotland and may have passed what was common knowledge in the Highlands to Washington. No evidence exists that the two men were innovating. In fact, production was only for about three years - 1797 to 1799- hardly enough time for experimentation.

That said, Washington's distillery, while not the first nor necessarily the largest in the colonies, was an important facility and highly deserving of reconstruction. The Distilled Spirits Council of the U.S. (DISCUS) decision to finance the work has been a "gift that keeps on giving." The industry has received press



Artist's rendering of the outside of the restored distillery. [Courtesy of Mount Vernon.]



A cut-away view showing the second floor, where the museum will be placed. [Courtesy of Mount Vernon.]



Mount Vernon Rye ad from 1940. Still colonial in theme, but with no direct reference to Washington, it pictures the traditional square bottles.

attention from around the world for its efforts and has made the project a centerpiece of its public relations.

### Whiskey Museum and Trial

Sometime next summer the sides of the reconstructed distillery building will rise, and by 2006, the first visitors are expected. When it was discovered that Washington's original building had a second story and that room would be available, it was decided to use that space to celebrate the historical roots of American distilling. DISCUS pledged to an additional \$300,000 to create the museum, bringing the total cost of the project to \$1.5 million. Among the displays are likely to be whiskey flasks, bottles and jugs of historical interest.

Moreover, whiskey has been bottled in commemorative bottles and jugs, from barrels that were shipped down the Potomac for the distillery ground-breaking in 2001 and stored on the Mount Vernon grounds. Those spirits have been bottled and sold for hefty prices at annual auctions. Earlier this year additional whiskey was distilled at Mount Vernon itself using Washington's not-so-secret recipe. That too is being specially bottled and sold at auction, with proceeds

benefiting the restoration. These commemorative bottles and jugs - instant collectibles - also are likely to be on display in the new museum.

Washington's distillery also is being touted as the "Gateway" of what industry representatives are calling the "Whiskey Trail," featuring distilleries, museums and historic sites. The trail includes Faunces Tavern Museum in New York City, where Washington bid farewell to his troops in 1783, and Alexandria's Gadsby's Tavern, ten miles up the road from Mount Vernon, where George Washington often dined.

Among other stops on the Whiskey Trail are three in Pennsylvania, clustered around Pittsburgh: Woodville Plantation in Bridgeville, significant for its identification with the Whiskey Rebellion; the West Overton Museum in Scottdale, a pre-Civil War village on the National Register of Historic Districts with its Overholt Mill & Distillery on site; and the Oliver Miller Homestead in South Park, another Whiskey Rebellion locale and frontier landmark.

As the trail moves west, a number of historic American distilleries will be stops. They include George Dickel (Tullahoma) and Jack Daniels (Lynchburg) in Tennessee and Jim Beam (Clermont), Maker's Mark (Loretto), Wild Turkey (Lawrenceburg) and Woolford Reserve (Versailles) in Kentucky. The route ends at the Oscar Getz Whiskey History Museum in Bardstown, Kentucky, with its major collection of flasks, jugs and other whiskey items.

Given the burst of publicity being given to Washington and his whiskey-making, hoopla that surely will grow as the distillery reconstruction nears completion, the last shreds of secrecy are falling away. In their place is open recognition that George Washington not only was first in the hearts of his countrymen, but also, first in their hip flasks.

Material for this article came from a variety of sources, including the interviews with Mount Vernon staff, and the Mount Vernon and DISCUS websites. Particularly useful was a paper written by Esther White for a meeting of the Society for Historical Archeology in St. Louis in January, 2004. Portions of this article have also appeared in the Potomac Bottle Club's *Pontil* newsletter.



A Platte Valley jug commemorating the 2001 distillery ground-breaking at Mount Vernon.