

that historians re-envision the role of overseeing in early American history.

JENNIFER OAST, *Professor of History, Bloomsburg University, Bloomsburg, PA, USA*

Professor Oast is the author of Institutional Slavery: Slave Owning Churches, Schools, Colleges, and Businesses in Virginia, 1680–1860 (2016).

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Washington at the Plow: The Founding Farmer and the Question of Slavery. *By Bruce A. Ragsdale.* Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021. x + 358 pp. Hardcover, \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-674-24638-6.

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Reviewed by Stuart Leibiger

There are many fine books about George Washington and slavery. Likewise, there are excellent studies of Washington as a scientific farmer and businessman. In *Washington at the Plow: The Founding Farmer and the Question of Slavery*, Bruce A. Ragsdale, former director of the Federal Judicial History Office at the Federal Judicial Center, combines in a single authoritative monograph these two topics that cannot be understood apart from one another.

Embarking on a career as a Virginia planter in 1759, writes Ragsdale, “Washington aspired to be an enlightened landowner, committed to innovation and experiment, drawing on the knowledge found in British agricultural treatises” (p. 21). In adopting “the New Husbandry,” Washington joined a trans-Atlantic community of agriculturalists dedicated to modeling and disseminating scientific farming techniques to smaller farmers.

By 1766, explains Ragsdale, Washington began to free himself of British consignment merchants by replacing labor-intensive tobacco planting with wheat farming. Surprisingly, the switch to wheat increased Washington’s investment in and commitment to enslaved labor, leaving him “by 1775 more deeply invested in slavery than ever before” (p. 76). Agricultural improvements at Mount Vernon required the enslaved workforce to follow advanced farming techniques necessary to cultivate and process wheat that were typically performed by hired white laborers.

Regarding British policy prior to the Revolution as an economic as well as a political threat, Washington not only diversified his crops but also found alternative markets. As an example, Ragsdale cites the mill

Washington opened at Mount Vernon to grind flour for export to the West Indies and even Europe.

During the Revolutionary War, argues Ragsdale, Washington insisted “that the management of his private estate reinforce his public reputation,” and “understood that . . . his estate henceforth would serve as a public example” to “the Atlantic world” (pp. 79, 100). When the war disrupted his overseas trade and profits, Washington instructed his estate manager—for the good of public credit—to accept payment in depreciated paper money. He also gave orders not to recoup lost revenue by publicly selling off enslaved people. Indeed, the Revolution gave Washington “a striking new perspective on slavery” that made him want eventually—as he put it—to “get quit of” enslaved people (p. 89).

Upon returning home after the war in 1783, Washington “embarked on a sweeping reorganization of every aspect of farming at his estate” to make it as productive as the most advanced British farms (p. 102). Among Washington’s innovations, Ragsdale lists consolidation of land, multiyear crop rotations, fertilizers and manures, live hedges instead of fences, the ditching of new fields, modern plows and other farm implements, state-of-the art farm buildings (including the mill and a treading barn), the breeding of superior farm animals such as mules, and naturalistic landscape design. Washington’s corporate bureaucracy included an estate manager, an expert farmer hired from England, and overseers at each of his five farms.

The new farming system “imposed a far more demanding work regimen” on the enslaved at Mount Vernon, requiring them to labor longer hours year-round regardless of the weather (p. 102). For example, African American ditchers drained swamps to create arable fields, labor usually performed by skilled whites. Ragsdale contends that adapting slave labor became “the fundamental difficulty in implementing a British model of husbandry at Mount Vernon” (p. 133). Seeking greater efficiency, Washington carefully recorded the labor performed by the enslaved in account books.

Washington’s endeavor to implement the New Husbandry with enslaved workers also flew in the face of the growing antislavery movement in the Atlantic world. While he paid lip service to the abolition movement, he did little publicly to support it. Ragsdale points out that Washington did, however, take steps to “ameliorate” slavery by making it more humane. He avoided selling enslaved families apart, provided sufficient food, and limited physical punishment. He expected the enslaved to perform hard work in return as a reciprocal obligation.

After the Revolution, recounts Ragsdale, Washington engaged in an extensive correspondence with noted British agriculturalists, including Arthur Young and Sir John Sinclair. Washington hoped this exchange

would not only improve American farming but also would also renew friendly ties with the English nation.

By 1793, the difficulties of implementing the New Husbandry with enslaved laborers, argues Ragsdale, inspired Washington to attempt a final transformation of Mount Vernon: leasing his farms to knowledgeable European tenants who would continue his innovative practices. One motive behind this scheme, Washington privately wrote, was “to liberate a certain species of property which I possess” (p. 239). Despite assistance from British agriculturalists, Washington failed to locate suitable tenants to lease his Mount Vernon farms. This circumstance convinced Washington to postpone the emancipation of his enslaved people until after his and his wife’s death.

Meticulously researched and well-written, *Washington at the Plow* sheds considerable new light on the political/economic thought of the first president—a much more sophisticated, intellectual, and complex man than most people realize: he possessed an enlightened vision in which the U.S. engaged in international free trade and exchanged agricultural information for the betterment of mankind. Domestically, he advocated the dissemination of best practices to common farmers by disinterested elite agriculturalists like himself. On a personal level, Washington exhibited an obsessive concern for his reputation. Wishing to separate himself from the taint of slavery, he freed his enslaved people in his last will and testament after the failure of plans to emancipate them during his lifetime. He micromanaged his farm and utilized science, experiments, record keeping, and managers to maximize efficiency and profits. As one contemporary noted, Washington’s “greatest pride . . . is to be thought the first farmer in America” (p. 172).

STUART LEIBIGER, Professor and Chair of the History Department, La Salle University, Philadelphia, PA, USA

Professor Leibiger’s books include Founding Friendship: George Washington, James Madison, and the Creation of the American Republic (1999), *and* The Constitutional Convention of 1787 (2019).

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Slave Trade and Abolition: Gender, Commerce, and Economic Transition in Luanda. *By Vanessa S. Oliveira.* Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2021. xii + 173 pp., figures, maps, tables, glossary, index. Cloth, \$75.95. ISBN: 978-0-299-32580-0.

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Reviewed by Daniel B. Domingues da Silva