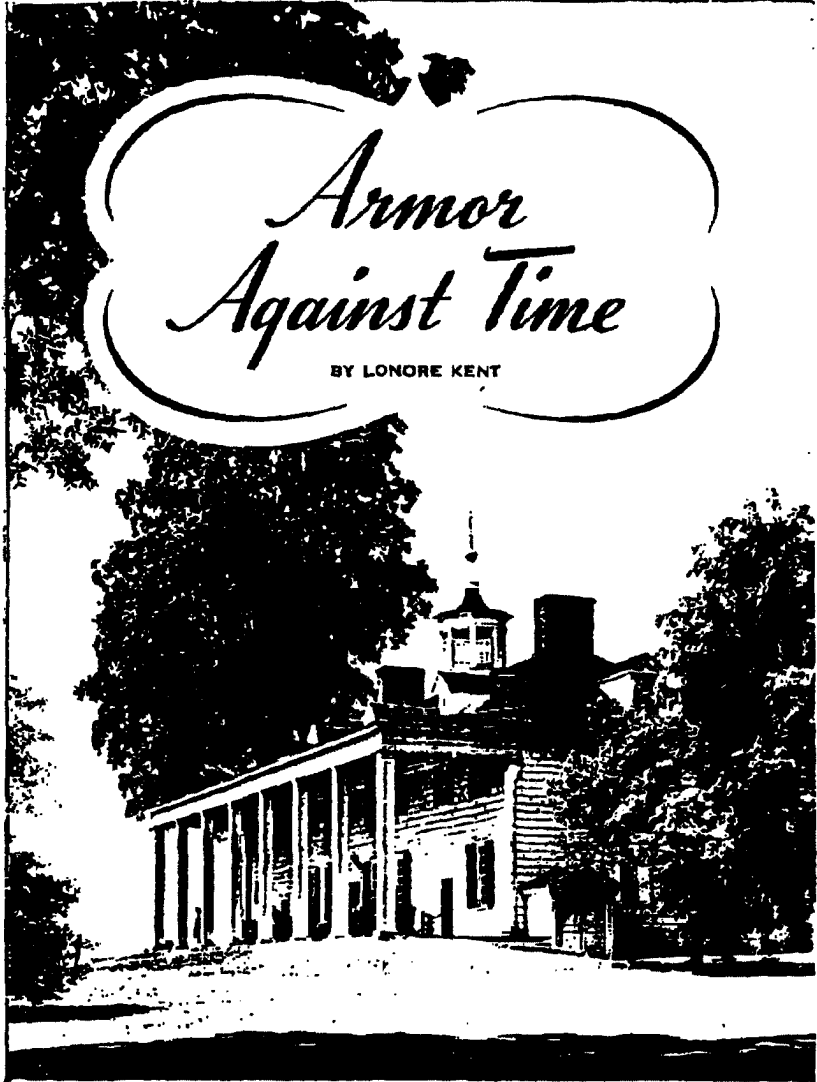


Armor Against Time

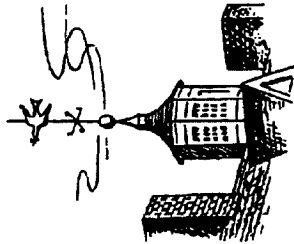
BY LONORE KENT



Washington's Beloved Mansion Survives the Centuries with
the Aid of Loving Maintenance and Protective Coatings

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"... the sooner it [the cupola] is put up the better; but be sure it is done. The wood part ... must receive a coat of white paint. The spire ... must have that of black; the bill of the bird is to be black, — and the olive branch in the mouth of it must be green." These were George Washington's own instructions when Mount Vernon's famous cupola was added. That was back in the summer of 1787. Today—one hundred and

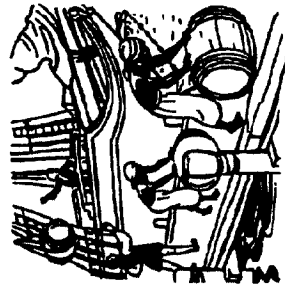
sixty years later—they're still being followed to the letter. As a matter of fact, all possible instructions of the General's are being carried out by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. That's the organization which set for itself the task of maintaining and safeguarding America's priceless heritage—the plantation on the Potomac.

There is also the matter of the exterior finish on the Mansion and adjoining buildings. Tourists, coming reverently up the path through the courtyard, study the outside surfaces of the buildings and decide, first, that they are stone. Then they discover that they're wood, finished to resemble stone.

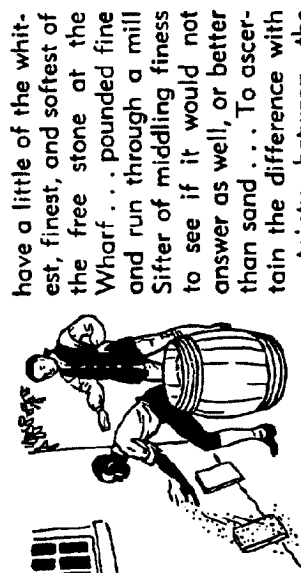
This finish, too, is in accordance with the written instructions of the Master of Mount Vernon. As in Washington's time, these chamfered wooden blocks are periodically given a coat of white paint to which white powdered limestone is applied, while the paint is still wet.

At first the General had white sand applied. This had to be brought by the Norfolk Packet from Point Comfort on the Chesapeake. Then, finding it difficult to obtain sand of uniform whiteness, his inventive mind—so fond of experimentation—determined to try another substance. In painstaking detail, Washington specified the procedure to be followed in testing the use of limestone which could be obtained from the rock strata near the Mount Vernon wharf.

On November 5, 1796, he wrote to his manager at Mount Vernon: "Some years ago, I had brought from Point Comfort ... a quantity of fine white Sand for the purpose of Sanding my houses anew when cir-



cumstances would enable me to give them a fresh coat of Paint. As it is my intention to do this the ensuing Summer, I request that you would inform me if the sand is there still ... Whether it is to be found now, or not, I wish you would



have a little of the whitest, finest, and softest of the free stone at the Wharf . . . pounded fine and run through a mill Sifter of middling finess to see if it would not answer as well, or better than sand . . . To ascertain the difference with certainty between the

sand and pounded Stone, take two pieces of Plank (plained, a foot square will be sufficient) and paint them in the usual manner with white lead grd. [ground] in oil and after the first coat is dry give them a second (the paint a little thicker) and while it is fresh throw (the board standing perpendicular on one edge) sand against one, and pounded stone against the other, as long as they will stick, and till every part of the paint is well covered. You will then, when they are dry, be able to decide which will look best and most resemble stone; which, together with the preservation of the Wood, are the ends to be answered by this operation."

Apparently, his manager found the limestone more desirable, for—three years later—Washington wrote to William Thornton: "This is the mode I pursued with the painting at this place, and wish to have pursued at my houses in the City. To this, I must add, that as it is rare to meet with Sand perfectly white, and clean; all my Houses have been Sanded with the softest free stone, pounded and sifted . . ."

Down through the years his letters and records regarding the maintenance of his property are dotted with references to the use of paint for the beautification and preservation of its surfaces. They run, in type, from his builder's memo, in 1758, that he "would make Uce of Ye red Paynt, when Oyle was got" to George Washington's instructions in 1787 to give "Paints and Oyl to Charles to paint the inside of the Barge," and, later in the same year, to supply "Green paint to Charles to paint bedsteads."

Many of the painting materials then known and available for plantation use are mentioned in Washington's letters and ledgers. You'll find that Mount Vernon had, among its painting supplies, such things as "white lead, red lead, linseed oil, turpentine, brushes, whiting, chalk, ivory black, lamp black, green, Prussian blue, red, Spanish brown, verdigris, buff, yellow ochre, umbre, Queen's yellow, yellow lead, blue vitriol, white arsenic, rose or yellow pink, oak bark, alum and Brazil wood."



And you'll find interesting instructions of the time for combining them.

"To make superfine Verdigrise," advises one, "take blue Vitriol,

any quantity, boil it in a kettle, until all dissolved. Also have dissolving in another kettle, at the same time, three fourths of the weight of vitriol and of Pearl ashes, and to every ten pounds of vitriol one pound of white Arsenic. When all dissolved, pour the Pearl ashes and Arsenic in a Cask, and pour on your Vitriol. Hove it well stirred as you pour in and it is done."

Then there are these directions to make "rose or yellow Pink. Take black Oak bark, as much as you please, boil it over a fire until the liquor is strong. Then put some alum in it, pour it on whitening and it is done. Also is rose Pink made with Brazil wood and alum as before-mentioned.

Today, when you can buy the finest colors and finishes that scientists can create—all ready for application—it's hard to realize the time and work involved in concocting paint of the desired type and color in the Eighteenth Century. Yet, in spite of the difficulties involved, concoct them they did at Mount Vernon—most of the time, at least.

There was a time—back in 1793—when Washington's manager wrote him: "Indeed there is a Great deal of painting wanting. The pillars

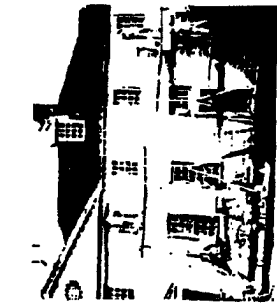


It might be a different story . . .

of the Piazza are very naked, and many other places are wanting paint so that if Your Excellency Chuses to have them done there is no danger of sending too much White Lead . . . " Washington's prompt answer, written four days later, promised: "I will, by the first Vessel to Alexandria send oil and paint agreeably to your Memorandum. The Pillars of the Piazza and other parts of the Mansion house must be examined and repaired before they are painted, after which I will have both sides of it and ends painted and sanded, as well as the Pillars."

Unquestionably, Washington was keenly aware of the vital importance of adequate maintenance. If he hadn't been, the structure would certainly not be in the fine condition it is today. During the last repainting session, some of the glass panes in the windows were replaced. To do so it was necessary to remove all previous coats of paint.

"Beneath the protecting coats of paint, we found the wood to be structurally sound and in excellent condition," reports Charles C. Wall, the Superintendent of Mount Vernon. "Decay is the ever-present enemy of old buildings," he comments, "and paint is the most effective weapon in combating it. Here, at Mount Vernon, we are fully aware of its protective function."



But there — at Mount Vernon — it might be an entirely different story if the Mansion were not so carefully, so reverently maintained and protected. High winds from the Patamac might rattle shutters hanging loosely from their hinges. Bare wood, unguarded by paint, might be rotting and disintegrating with each new onslaught of destroying weather.

The American Public can thank its lucky stars that its treasured heritage—Mount Vernon—is so carefully guarded by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association and by that seemingly commonplace substance—paint.

Today . . . from the cupola to the smoke house . . . from the chamfered blocks to the gate . . . Mount Vernon is given adequate paint protection—protection quite in keeping with the General's orders.

If he were alive today, he would probably be writing memoranda to his manager specifying the use of the finest modern finishes . . . memos which would be the current counterpart of this note to his manager in 1792: "Ascertain as near as you can how much red led (ground in Oil) it

will take to complete the painting of the roofs of the Old Spinning House, Salt House, Smoke House, Wash house and Coach house, (adjoining) together with the four Garden houses (if not already done), also white led to finish what was begun, and not completed, and Oil for the whole."

Today, every effort is made to conform with the original colors and surface appearances determined by Washington himself. The best modern types of protective finishes are used so that Mount Vernon may continue to survive in the finest possible condition . . . so that it may be constantly and unceasingly armored against time.



COLOR SCHEMES OF MOUNT VERNON ROOMS
PROVIDE INSPIRATION FOR
POSSESSORS OF FURNITURE OF THAT PERIOD

★ ★ ★ ★

Banquet Hall: Walls painted a light buff, with the woodwork in a deeper tone of the same color. Detail in carving brought out in white. Adam ceiling, white.

West Parlor: Panels, stiles and trim painted sand color; off-white ceiling with medallion brought out in gold.

Music Room: Upper walls painted a light silver gray. Dado area slightly darker. Ceiling, off-white.

Lower Hall: Panelling painted a light greenish-gray; ceiling, white.

Downstairs Bedroom: Panelling and woodwork, medium gray-green. Ceiling, off-white.

Dining Room: Dado and trim, painted fawn color; upper walls, a lighter tint of the same color. Ceiling, off-white.

Library: Walls painted steel gray; ceiling, white.

Butler's Pantry: Walls and ceiling painted white. Trim, fawn-colored.

Washington's Bedroom: Walls painted white, with trim in fawn color. Black baseboard and fireplace facing.

Yellow Bedroom: Trim painted deep gray-green; ceiling, white. Wall paper: blue-gray pattern on cream-yellow background.

Nelly Custis' Room: Trim and dado painted putty color; ceiling, cream. Upper walls: dull rose, brown, blue and green pattern on cream background.

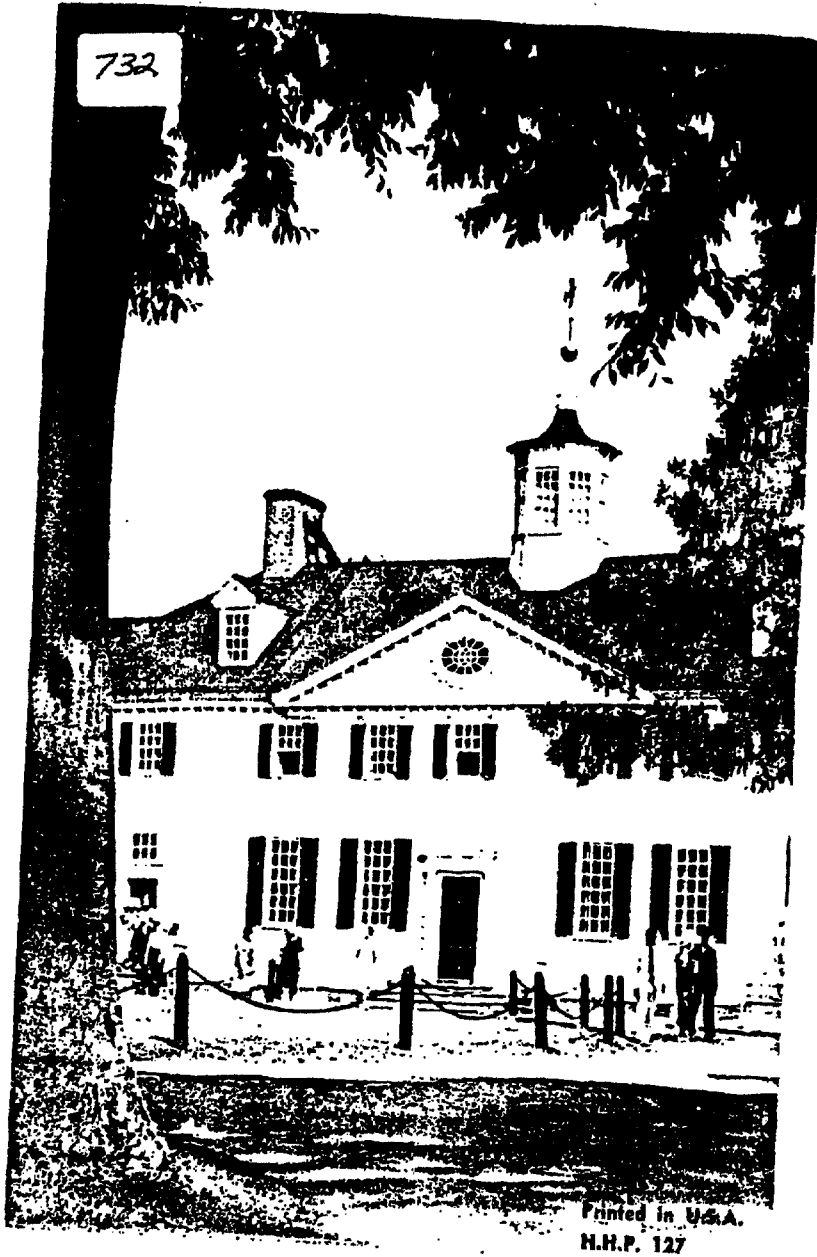
Hall Bedroom: Trim, gray; ceiling, white. For walls—rose and dull green pattern on white.

Blue Bedroom: Trim, medium gray-blue; ceiling, white. Walls: pinkish-beige pattern on white.

LaFayette Room: Upper walls gray, with green and grayed-rose pattern. Dado and trim painted gray; ceiling, pale gray.



*Photographs:
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