

A Year in Review at Gunston Hall  
Fiscal Year 2010-2011

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## Report of the First Regent: A Year of Expanded Thinking

Throughout the 2010-2011 fiscal year the Board of Regents refined and expanded its thinking about the study of George Mason and Gunston Hall Plantation, and the furtherance of our mission.

First, we have grown to appreciate that in studying Mason and his plantation, we no longer define the “historic” portion of the property as an immediate curtilage around the Mansion. Rather, we now recognize the entirety of Gunston Hall Plantation as “historic.” Director Reese has shared his perception that every element and *relationship* of elements contributed to Mason’s design of his plantation home. Views, perspectives, the location of the landing road, even modest details of topography, all contribute to our appreciation that nothing at Gunston Hall is a result of serendipity. Significantly, the Historic Gardens and Grounds Committee was renamed the Historic Landscape Committee.

In addition, we embraced change within the Mansion. Following weeks of quiet study Curator Caroline Riley chose to reverse the furnishings of the Palladian and Chinese rooms. The evolution of discovery with regard to wall treatments and original paint color formed a natural segue to a better understanding of how each room would have been used by the Mason family. Further study led to a reversing of mantels between a Mansion bedroom and the library.

Finally, we are working hard in furtherance of the mission of the Board of Regents, to embrace curiosity on the part of the public regarding our role as administrators, to supplement the ever-dwindling resources of the Commonwealth of Virginia, and by expanding our website. With the expertise of Librarian and Archivist Mark Whatford we can share knowledge of all the Board does to “preserve, interpret, and promote this historic site in order to educate the public about the international significance of its owner, George Mason, for his unique contribution to the universal cause of human rights.”

Mrs. Henry R. Raab  
First Regent, Gunston Hall

## Letter from the Director

This has been a difficult year for not-for-profit organizations in America, including historic sites. Visitation levels have diminished at historic properties, revenues have fallen, municipal and state funding for these institutions has been cut drastically. Gunston Hall remains healthy for one reason: private support. Much of this support comes from Gunston's loyal and generous Regents and Former Regents. "Friends" giving grows stronger each year, despite the failing economy. Major gifts from foundations have funded capital projects, and sizeable bequests help sustain the Library, historic research and educational initiatives. Gunston Hall received \$1,053,474 in gifts, grants and "Friends" donations this year, drew \$274,253 from its managed funds, and received an allocation of \$489,039 from the Commonwealth of Virginia (with an additional \$11,661 in prior year reversions, \$32,581 in insurance recoveries and \$8,453 in IT funding). The Commonwealth also provided \$63,916 from the maintenance reserve for a handicapped access project. Admission receipts totaled \$151,300. These amounts and the final tally of earned income will be confirmed by auditors and presented to the Board of Regents at their Annual Meeting in October.

With this solid economic assistance, in the fiscal year 2010-2011 Gunston Hall's Regents and staff have coordinated installation of a new boiler and related HVAC improvements in the Visitors Center, exterior restoration of two houses on the estate, completion of a new well and water works, and restoration of the southeast chamber on the second floor of the Mansion (previously used for storage and now open to the public). The Commonwealth funded construction of a new handicapped access lift on the east elevation of the Mansion. Private grants enabled extensive relocation of utility lines underground and in the Mansion's basement, accommodating construction of the lift. In June, craftsmen and technicians began an enormous task: conservation of the black walnut woodwork of Gunston Hall including doors, door reveals, and elements of the superbly carved Hall/Passage Stair. Although visitors and Mansion guides must dodge scaffolds, conservators, and drop-cloths for the duration of summer, the end result will be rewarding. This magnificent restoration project has been funded by the Nancy Woodson Spire Foundation.

As other components in this report confirm, Gunston Hall staff members continue to acquire important objects, make fascinating archaeological discoveries, present outstanding educational programs, provide guided tours to thousands of visitors, maintain the Mansion, support facilities and the grounds -- all in the effort to inform the public about the importance of George Mason.

David L. Reese  
Director, Gunston Hall

## Visitation and Special Events

25,060 individuals visited Gunston Hall in 2010-2011. 9,305 children visited with school groups, and another 1,895 students of all ages toured Gunston Hall with their families. Outreach programs served 475 students in local schools. Adults, seniors, and individuals on group tours compose the remaining portion of Gunston's visitors. 460 people took advantage of the new \$25.00 family rate. The Gunston Hall Docents Association provided guides for school tours, and Gunston's "twenty-two" Mansion interpreters guided visitors through the house seven days a week.

Throughout the year, Gunston Hall staff members orchestrated a variety of special events including the Liberty Lecture Series which examined the writers and philosophers who inspired the American Revolution, the Annual "Kite Day Festival," the Plantation Christmas celebration that incorporated living history performances and a holiday dinner, and a Decorative Arts Symposium focusing upon the French influence on American design in the Federal period. An enormously popular program documenting the history of segregation and civil rights on Mason Neck 1950-1970, featured a dynamic speech by journalist Juan Williams. Smaller programs crafted for special interest audiences gave children the opportunity to participate in archaeological excavations or offered adults the chance to learn and practice 18<sup>th</sup>-century hearth cooking techniques. On Sunday afternoons, architecture aficionados enjoyed ninety minute tours of the Mansion's exterior and interior, including the cellar. Other tour groups explored the estate's historic landscape.

In 2010-2011 Gunston Hall rented out portions of the facility for several programs having an educational purpose. From May 9-13, the Administrative Division of the United States Courts offered leadership training to forty-five of their senior and mid-level managers at Gunston. The trainees studied how America's Founders worked collaboratively in creating the United States Constitution. They attended daily lectures, enjoyed extensive tours of Gunston Hall and its grounds, and made field trips to "Montpelier," "Monticello," and Mt. Vernon." On Memorial Day, Gunston Hall hosted a barbeque for the contestants of the Scripps National Spelling Bee and their families. The event was held under an enormous tent in the great meadow west of the Mansion. 940 guests attended, and during the day they enjoyed Mansion tours, hearth cooking demonstrations, living history presentations, modern and 18<sup>th</sup>-century games, and showings of the site's orientation film, "George Mason and the Bill of Rights." Educational Associate Frank Barker has coordinated a series of teacher workshops, including several for teachers attending the Bill of Rights Institute. The workshop incorporates tours, discussion groups and lectures about the creation of American government. These educational rentals generate revenue for Gunston Hall and also accommodate programs which relate directly to Gunston Hall's mission.

## Gunston Hall Archaeology Program

Archaeological investigations during the reporting period focused on the kitchen yard and the area near the land front (north) side of the Mansion. The kitchen yard work was initially done in response to the pending construction of a handicapped access lift and associated utility lines, and realignment of a section of the kitchen yard fence. Most of the area investigated was once covered by a frame addition to the Mansion, dating from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. It was found that a basement once underlay half of the southern-most section of the frame structure, and that the cavity had been filled with mixed soil containing 18<sup>th</sup>- through 20<sup>th</sup>-century artifacts. Other findings include; 1) a brick and concrete pier that probably supported the southeast corner of a porch attached to the frame structure; 2) a post feature belonging to a fence which had at one time been thought to have been the original kitchen yard paled fence, but which has now proven to be of 19<sup>th</sup>-century origin; 3) a post hole and mold feature which suggests that the 18<sup>th</sup>-century garden fence extended into what is now presented as the kitchen yard and joined the east side of the Mansion; 4) two superimposed pebble walkways. The upper of these seems to run diagonally across the kitchen yard and was probably in use into the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The lower of the two runs parallel to the east side of the mansion, about twenty feet from it, and appears to date from the 18<sup>th</sup>-century. There is evidence that a fence was located a short distance from the edge of this walk nearest the Mansion. An effort is now being made to follow this walk, since it may have a bearing on the size and configuration of the original kitchen yard. Among the many artifacts collected during the walkway excavations are coins dating to 1812, 1802 and 1775, and a two-pronged, bone-handled fork of a style dating to the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century.

Excavations on the land front of the Mansion are being undertaken to determine if there is any evidence of a carriage circle. Although there is no documentary evidence of such a feature at Gunston Hall, it would be very unusual for a house of Gunston's period and status not to have one. The remains of an old road were found running parallel to the north side of the Mansion and closer to it than the current road. The oldest (deepest) part of the road appears to date to the 18<sup>th</sup>-century. A walkway lies about a foot to the south (mansion) side of the road. Also, an effort is underway to find evidence of a carriage mounting block that once reposed alongside this road.

## Historic Landscape and Grounds

In late summer of 2010, the large willow oak tree northeast of the Mansion's land front entrance started dropping huge limbs. The tree had been in deteriorating condition for many years. At the October Meeting of the Regents, members of the Historic Landscape Committee voted unanimously to have the oak removed, citing the potential danger of falling limbs and noting that the tree was not in keeping with George Mason IV's plan for the grounds. Quality Tree Care took down the old tree several weeks later, utilizing an army of tree climbers, pruners and cutters.

Rotting wooden rail fences were removed from land front areas and the entrance driveway during winter months. Archaeologists are now searching for evidence of the original configuration of the line fences in the vicinity. John Mason, in his "Recollections" of Gunston Hall, describes extensive fields of close-cropped grass on the land front, which were enclosed by fence on the outer edge and bounded by woods. Grounds workers Berto Delfi and Buddy Mongold have worked diligently to establish good turf in the open fields, spending many days mowing, smoothing rough areas of ground and clipping saplings. As a result of their hard labor, the appearance of the approach to Gunston Hall is beginning to match John's depiction.

In February and March, the steep bank west of the four squares of George Mason's vegetable garden was cleared of brush and fallen timber. It is now possible to see the old Barn Wharf Trail below the high bank, emphasizing an historic feature of the landscape. A new red Ford pick-up truck, purchased on Commonwealth contract in January, facilitates this work on the grounds.

## Mansion Restoration and Collections

The most important addition to Gunston Hall's collection in 2010-2011 was a pair of portraits of George Mason IV and his wife Ann Eilbeck Mason. John Hesselius painted marriage portraits of the couple in 1750; by 1811 the portraits were badly deteriorated, and children of George and Ann commissioned the artist Dominic W. Boudet to paint three sets of copies of the originals. The original paintings were subsequently lost, making the 1811 portraits of greater significance. They are among the few known images of Mason and his first wife. One pair of these portraits was given to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts by David K.E. Bruce. The Directors of the Virginia Museum have graciously donated the portraits to Gunston Hall in perpetuity.

A variety of new acquisitions are 18th-century objects which correspond to archeological finds at Gunston Hall or archival references to objects belonging to George Mason. For example, a pair of recently-purchased English glass wine decanters, ca. 1770-1780, relate closely to the description of decanters purchased by Mason in 1766. A set of four elegant ale glasses was purchased to correspond to archaeological shards of almost identical glasses found on the site. Evidence unearthed by the Archaeology Department also informed the purchase of one dozen salt-glazed stoneware plates and two serving dishes, all in the "barley" or "mosaic" patterns made in Britain in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. Other shards confirm Mason family possession of more unusual and costly ceramics, such as pierced fretwork creamware. While the stoneware probably saw daily use by the family, the creamware was likely used for social entertainments. Ten dinner plates of the reticulated creamware in George Mason's pattern have been purchased from a London antiquarian. A highly important Virginia easy chair, made near Petersburg in the 1760s, has rested in Gunston's storage collection for a long time. The chair has been conserved, exquisitely re-upholstered, and placed on view in the Little Parlor. Since George Mason was afflicted with gout, he may have utilized a similar easy chair.

There have been major restoration and conservation projects in the Mansion's interior. The only remaining, original, second floor fireplace mantel from the house had been installed in the Hertle Building in 1955. With assistance from Matt Webster, an architectural conservator at Colonial Williamsburg, the mantel surround was removed from the Hertle Library and re-installed in its original location in the Mansion's Southwest Chamber. Afterwards, paint conservator Chris Mills replicated a faux-stone finish using grey paint and Potomac River sand, based upon paint analysis evidence found by Dr. Susan Buck. The original black walnut door between the Dining Room and Parlor, with boldly carved egg and dart moldings, was conserved by F. Carey Howlett, formerly of Colonial Williamsburg.

## Library & Archives

Mark Whatford joined the staff in late August of last year, assuming the responsibilities of Librarian, Archivist and Chief Information Officer of Gunston Hall. In January a generous bequest was made to the Library from the estate of Dudley Porter, Jr. in memory of his wife Mary Rhoda Montague Porter for the conservation and acquisition of books and documents relating to George Mason. Currently four of Mason's books are being conserved with funds from this bequest. The Founding Fathers Consortium [book catalog] continues to move ahead; once Mount Vernon's Library Staff has completed adding items, the catalog will be made publicly available. Ultimately, Stratford Hall's Library will also join this initiative.

The Library has added over 150 titles to its open stacks since September through the support of our Regents and Docents. At auction last October, the Library acquired a George Mason IV signed document dated May 16, 1751. This is now the earliest signed GM IV item in our collection.

There have been exciting discoveries in the Archives. An unpublished letter from George Mason to George Washington, dated April 1769, was uncovered in Gunston's stored files. A political pamphlet written by Thomas Cooper in 1792 was also found in archival storage. The pamphlet belonged to George Washington and bears his signature on the cover. This same pamphlet was loaned to Thomas Jefferson by President Washington. A second, unpublished Washington letter was also found in the collection; in it the President, prior to leaving office in 1797, gives a recommendation for his Philadelphia cook.

## Public Relations

Director David Reese and Development Coordinator Susan Blankenship attended the American Bus Association Marketplace in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on January 10–12, 2011. Seminars with historic attraction peers and travel specialists provided great insight on the group tour industry. This second year of participation has garnered five bus tours to date, as well as early Plantation Christmas bookings.

Impressive feature articles and paid advertisements appeared in widely-circulated magazines and newspapers throughout the past fiscal year, including *AAA World*, *American Spirit*, *Preservation*, *Smithsonian*, *Where Magazine*, *The Washington Post Annual Museum Guide*, and *The Washington Post Weekend*. On June 16, a State Department tour for members of the Foreign Press Association garnered a Romanian Public Television documentary and a Serbian newspaper feature on George Mason and Gunston Hall.

Outreach and VIP tours included a visit from the Women’s Committee of the Trust for the National Mall, a Mt. Vernon-Lee Chamber of Commerce reception, a luncheon and tour for the Fairfax Ambassadors Program, the Ft. Belvoir Officers’ Wives’ Club Annual Information Fair, and onsite tours and meeting space for several NSCDA chapters and committees. The Dominion Foundation generously provided funding for the design, production and state-wide circulation of a handsome new Gunston Hall Rack Card.

## The Gunston Hall Museum Shop

Visitors to Gunston Hall enjoy the addition of a trip to the museum shop. Here they find a lasting momento of their Gunston Hall experience. Postcards, books, jewelry, wine, and more are amply available for purchase. The shop is also the source for gifts to the surrounding Mason Neck community.

The Gunston Hall Museum Shop is a bricks and clicks store. Gunston Hall themed merchandise and books about George Mason and the Bill of Rights are for sale. Our online shop can be found by selecting the “Shop” option through the main Gunston Hall web address [www.gunstonhall.org](http://www.gunstonhall.org). You are also invited to visit our Facebook page.

Like many retail venues we have been challenged by the economy and the new methods in which retail is valued but with pride we report our 2011 yearly sales up over 2010 by \$30,000.

## Gunston Hall Financial Statement

Gunston Hall's financial statement will be available on line subsequent to presentation to the Board of Regents in October 2011.