

# Historic Southern Indiana

*Interpretation Workshop, March 6-8, 2000*

---

## Providing Significant Experiences for All Visitors

Presented By Dennis Latta

We live in a pluralistic world. In the 1950s it was assumed that everyone held the same values, had similar backgrounds, and shared in the given explanation of history and of great people. If we look back today this mind set was probably naive at best. Today as always we live in a world that abounds with many different cultural groups. This coupled with the fact that these groups at least in the western world are mobile. People who visit parks, and historic sites today are wealthier, better educated, and more diverse in their backgrounds. They are also more sophisticated. The days when the evening program was a projector show with out of focus slides, and the historic house tour was basically the antiques road show are drawing to a close. This is true even in Southern Indiana.

All of this change is coupled with the realization that the story or stories that we are called on to relate must take into account more than just one social and economic group. To illustrate this I would like to use an example of a historic home that we are all familiar with. That is the historic shrine Mount Vernon. Let's see, Mount Vernon is in Fairfax county about 15 miles from Washington D.C. About a million people visit it each year. The present park is about 500 acres in size. George Washington lived at Mount Vernon as a gentleman farmer before the American Revolution. He left to take command of the Continental Army in 1775 and returned when the war ended. He was to leave again in 1789 and would not return as a permanent resident until 8 years later. He enjoyed the pleasures of Mount Vernon for only two years until his untimely death. Mount Vernon itself is large and comfortable. But if you have never visited it you will be surprised when you take the tour. It's a farm house not a mansion. The rooms are not grand or huge like one would find in the great country houses in England. Mount Vernon is a successful Gentlemen's residence. It has 20 rooms, and two stories with a big attic. There is a huge porch across the front of the building. The porch is the most striking feature and the fact that the house is built on a hill.

The whole structure is built of wood which I'm sure that 18th century families worried about some times because of the danger of fire. But the wood siding was craftily made to look like stone. The main part of the house was built under the direction of Augustine Washington. When Augustine died in 1743 Lawrence Washington, George's half brother

# Historic Southern Indiana

*Interpretation Workshop, March 6-8, 2000*

---

inherited the farm. Lawrence renamed the house Mount Vernon in honor of Admiral Edward Vernon. Lawrence had served in the British Navy and Vernon was his commanding officer. George Washington inherited the house in 1761. The only major feature that General Washington added was the porch. He would live there the remainder of his life. Both Martha and George are buried near the house.

Well what can we say about this house. Besides that it belonged to a great man and his wife, the father of our country, and so on. First of all who did all the work there? Washington owned scores of slaves, where did these slaves come from? What was their family life like? Where did they live? What was a typical day like for them? What were their fears and hopes? There were also craftsmen, indentured servants, and overseers on the farm. How did their families live? How was the life of a slave woman different then a Martha Washington? While we are on that subject what did Martha Washington do to pass her time? What did people do for entertainment? Tobacco was the main cash crop. Mount Vernon is on the Atlantic coastal plain. There was very little circulating money. What could we say about Washington's stepchildren? Could we say something about George Washington's funeral? An event whose anniversary was 200 years ago last December.

Now we have all these facts right. Some of them are important and some of them are trivia. The pieces of information are like the pieces of a puzzle. Some of the pieces are very important. If you lose these then you will not be able to make any sense of the puzzle. Other pieces could be lost without losing the essence of the picture. There is another side to this discussion. Which of these puzzle pieces would be important to the special needs visitor, or group of African American preschoolers from Washington D.C., or a tour bus of retired school teachers? Similarly let's look at two interpretive talks that could be given at Mount Vernon to a group of inner city kids.

Talk number one: Good morning everyone welcome to Mount Vernon. This is the home of our first President George Washington. President Washington inherited this farm from his half brother Lawrence in 1761. Mount Vernon was built by Washington's father Augustine. Washington and his wife and stepchildren lived here from the 1760s until his death in 1799. President Washington and his wife Martha are buried adjacent to the house. The house is made of wood, there are 20 rooms in it. President Washington liked porches and he added the beautiful one that we are standing under. Please watch your step as you enter the house. This talk goes on and on and it is full of facts and good information. I ask you a question; how many of these inner city kids would be listening to this educational talk?

Talk number two: Hello everyone, welcome to Mount Vernon. You know this is such a big beautiful house. Do you see that window right there? Can you imagine standing

# Historic Southern Indiana

*Interpretation Workshop, March 6-8, 2000*

---

outside that window on a cold winter night? Have you ever been cold, really cold, shivering cold, so cold that your teeth were chattering? In the window you see a candle flickering and a woman looking out onto the fields that just last summer were full of waving green tobacco plants. There were slaves working in the fields then it was hot, not like this night. The woman seems sad and lonely. She sighs and there are tears in her eyes. She thinks of her husband far away in the Continental Army camp. He has so much responsibility. The future of the whole country rests on his shoulders and from his letters he seems tired and discouraged. She wonders what will happen to them both. Will she be sitting by this window a year from now or will there only be ruins? Will they even be alive a year from now? She shudders to think, what could happen if your husband were captured by the British?

Talk number three: Good morning everyone welcome to Mount Vernon. This is a big place. It took lots of people to keep everything running here. Slaves, indentured servants, and overseers, all worked to make Mount Vernon a success. But everyone is not happy in their work. It is dusk and all seems peaceful at the slave cabins. But that is not true. In the cabin of Deborah and Harry Squash there is feverish activity. Harry has been away secretly. He tells Deborah that the British King has offered freedom to slaves who leave their masters. But how can they flee to the British? What if they are caught? At best they will be separated. At worst better not even think of that. How can they find the ships of the British navy? They continue to work late into the night. There are so many things to think about and so many people that they will leave forever. They have made their decision. They will be free come what may. It is now the time.

These three talks are all acceptable. They are all historically correct. But which one would you like to have your family listen to as they visit Mount Vernon for the first time, and what about those special groups, how would they relate to talk one, two, or three.

---

I have compiled a list of groups that have visited the National Park in Vincennes over the last few years. I would like to share this list with you. This will be food for our discussion later.

The fourth grade class from Vigo Elementary  
The Indiana School for the Blind  
The First United Methodist Seniors Boy Scout Troop 141  
Japanese executive from Toyota  
The Mayor of Vincennes, France  
Girl Scout Campers  
Lyons Home Extension Group  
The School for the Deaf

# Historic Southern Indiana

*Interpretation Workshop, March 6-8, 2000*

---

The Bambino Baseball Tourney boys and parents  
An African American convention groups representing the A.M.E. Methodist Church  
A Delegation from Northern Indiana representing the Miami's  
The elderhostles from Vincennes University and other colleges  
groups of Young Hoosiers from Indianapolis  
The German Exchange Students  
The Vincennes University American History Class  
The Little Shepard Day Care  
The Lawrenceville Camera Club  
Seminary Students from St. Meinard  
The Travel Writers Association  
The Respect for Law Enforcement Camp  
The League of Women Voters  
The Sisters of Providence from St. Mary's of the Woods College  
Many Families of all sorts  
The Cub Scout fall jamboree  
The Sheltered Workshops of Terre Haute  
Tour buses  
The Veterans of the USS Vincennes  
IU retired faculty  
The Retired Teachers Association

Now I want to inform you of something interesting. This comes under what if. What if we could create our very own park. **The following is a historic fabrication for this document.** The Indiana State Department of Natural Resources has decided to create a new state historic and natural park. This park is to honor the great Revolutionary patriot France Vigo. An anonymous donor, a computer industrialist has given \$5,000,000.00 to reconstruct Belle Fontaine, Vigo's summer home on its original site three miles south of Vincennes on the old buffalo Trace. There is also an open prairie meadow and an ancient woods adjacent to the site of Belle Fontaine that will be preserved and interpreted. Belle Fontaine was constructed in 1807. It is a two-story colonial home with clapboard siding. It is constructed entirely of yellow popular except for the sandstone foundation. There is a one story addition to the left of the main house.

The Vigo house is an I house. As one enters the front door one sees a stairwell and a hall. The door to the right leads to the parlor. In the parlor there is a stone fireplace and a mantle. On the mantle there is a weight driven clock made in the 1830's. Above the clock there is a flint lock rifle. On the wall to the left is a portrait of Thomas Jefferson. The windows have green Venetian blinds. There are several wooden chairs in the room. A walnut bookcase with several leather bound books is on the wall to the left. (Vigo was illiterate but probably still appreciated the idea of refinement the such possessions

# Historic Southern Indiana

*Interpretation Workshop, March 6-8, 2000*

---

conveyed.) On the right wall there is a walnut table with a wonder, a *boite eletrique*, an electric generator that produces static electricity. The popular opinion at the time is that electricity keeps people alive. There is another table with a silver tea service. The initials F.V. can clearly be seen on the silver tea pot and cups. In the corner is the famous Frances Vigo walking stick.

Across the hall from the parlor is the dining room. The major feature in this room is a billiards table. Against the two long walls are wooden chairs. On the near wall there is a folded trestle table. On the far wall there is a sideboard holding assorted china. On the sideboard there is a spice cabinet. Next to the sideboard there is a wine box. Of course there is a fireplace on the wall in common with the entry way. Over the fireplace there is an oil portrait of Elizabeth Shannon Vigo. On the outside wall of the room there are two doors. The door to the rear leads to a clerk's office. In the clerk's office there is a desk that has a pigeon hole back. The holes are filled with odd pieces of paper. On the desk there are several ledger books, a seal, and sealing wax, there are also three quill pens, and ink well and a candle. The clerk's tools of the trade are completed with a magnifying glass, a blotter and a small knife. The office unlike other rooms is heated with a small iron stove, a great innovation in early Vincennes.

The door in front of the room leads to a guest bedroom. This room also has an outside entry. If desired, the inside door leading into the dining room can be locked from the inside limiting access into the main house. The guest bedroom has only four pieces of furniture, a rope bed, a blanket chest, and large wardrobe, and a wash stand. The only other features of this rather empty room are a fireplace, the bed linen and the chamber pot. As one climbs the steps to the second floor of the home there is a chance to look into the Vigo bedroom. In the center there is a massive four poster bed. To the right there is a beautiful cherry armoire, and a blanket chest. The doors of the armoire are open and there is a petticoat, two gowns, a chemise, and a bed jacket on display. On the floor of the armoire there are several pairs of shoes. One pair of shoes, a lavender set of dancing shoes are especially beautiful and valuable. On top of the armoire are two caps and a plumed straw hat. The wardrobe of Francis Vigo is also in the room. In the magnificent walnut cabinet are waistcoats, jackets, trousers, and several hats. On the bottom shelf are several expensive shoes with silver buckles. There is a small table near the bed upon which is sitting a comb and a mirror. The bedroom across the hall is used as a guest room. There is a four poster bed and an armoire in the room. Both bedrooms have fireplaces.

As you walk through the rear hall door into the backyard you can see a pleasant small orchard that is composed of several apple, peach and cherry trees. There is also a garden, a grape arbor and a flower garden to stroll through. Behind all of this is a well, two servants cabins, and a privy. But the most important building in the backyard is the

# Historic Southern Indiana

*Interpretation Workshop, March 6-8, 2000*

---

summer kitchen. Beyond this is a grove of ancient trees, a small virgin forest. The Buffalo Trace pathway curves in front of the house.

Frances Vigo is a hero of the American Revolution. Vigo was born in northern Italy in the town of Mondovi on December 3, 1747. As a young man he enlisted in the Spanish Army and was stationed in Havana, Cuba. Later he transferred to New Orleans that was then in the possession of Spain. Vigo was later discharged from the Spanish army and moved north to Saint Louis. Soon he had created a successful dry goods business. When George Rogers Clark arrived in the Illinois Country he met with Vigo and asked him to travel to Vincennes. Vigo was to offer his services to Captain Leonard Helm who was commander of Fort Sackville. When Vigo arrived in Vincennes he was taken prisoner by British Lieutenant Govern Henry Hamilton. Hamilton's soldiers had retaken the fort. Because Vigo was a Spanish citizen and Spain was neutral in the current conflict Hamilton released Vigo. Within days Vigo was providing George Rogers Clark with much needed information. Vigo also provided supplies and money for the American cause. Vigo moved to Vincennes in 1783 and married Elizabeth Shannon in 1800. Vigo was to own two houses in Vincennes; one was located at Second and Busseron streets, the other home was Belle Fontaine. When William Henry Harrison moved to Vincennes in 1801, Vigo offered his house as a temporary home for the newly appointed Governor. Vigo's business continued to flourish and he became one of the most influential citizens in the territory. He was also active in the Territorial Militia serving as a Colonial. Vigo lived out his later life in Vincennes. For years he was the oldest man living in town. Tragically he lived long enough to loose his fortune and spent his last years in poverty.

The tour bus is arriving. The kids from the school in downtown Saint Louis are arriving, or maybe its the school for the deaf, or even a delegation of Japanese business people. What can we say to these visitors that will be meaningful that they will remember? That is what we will talk about today.

What elements of our story are universally significant?

**Discussion Period**---Divide into groups and create a story.

Some ideas:

1. The wealth of Francis Vigo, and the expensive lifestyle at Belle Fontaine.
2. Vigo as an immigrant.
3. There were 40 slaves in Vincennes in the late 18th century.
4. Vigo as patriot.
5. The life of Elizabeth Shannon.
6. The old trace, walking down the trace on the way to Louisville.
7. Vigo as an Italian American
8. Guests staying on the frontier, staying a night a Belle Fontaine dining with the Vigos.

# Historic Southern Indiana

*Interpretation Workshop, March 6-8, 2000*

---

9. The interest of wealthy people in science, in electricity, in the arts.
10. Vigo as a wealthy influential man and yet was illiterate.
12. The life of a servant.