

The Mount Vernon Trail – Connector to American History

Saki

Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

April 25, 2023



Figure 1: Bicycling on the Mount Vernon Trail with the Arlington Memorial Bridge and Lincoln Memorial in the background

Many bike trails take cyclists through peaceful, wooded places with serene natural views. In contrast, the Mount Vernon Trail leads through urban areas, in close proximity to the busy [George Washington Memorial Parkway](#) which it parallels for most of its 18-mile stretch. Situated in northern Virginia just across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C., this trail is a local oasis for folks wanting to stretch their legs and discover something interesting along the way.

To access the southern trail terminus, the start of my ride, I parked for free in the [east lot](#) of George Washington's [Mount Vernon Estate](#). Slightly south, past some [public restrooms](#), visitors can pay for entry to the historic grounds and receive a guided tour of Washington's Mansion, built in 1734.

Saving the estate tour for another day, I commenced riding north on the trail. I was impressed at how efficiently the valuable real estate of the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area is used to support the trail, which sometimes is squeezed onto narrow 50-foot corridors between the George Washington Memorial Parkway and the Potomac River. The first stretch was built by volunteers in 1972, 40 years after the parkway opened. Ellen Pickering and Barbara Lynch spearheaded this effort during a time when the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s supported bicycling as an eco-friendly transportation option. Since then, tree roots have grown, pushing up parts of the paved trail to create numerous little "speed bumps."

The trail is dotted with benches, a few fitness stations, pet-friendly drinking fountains, many parking options, and several restrooms; the latter two of which are shown on the [Mount Vernon Trail Map](#). Just note that many of the restrooms are closed and the fountains are turned off in the colder months.

My first stop was [Fort Hunt Park](#) (mile 3.3), where batteries defended the Potomac River during the Spanish American War. Riding through the park, I stopped at Battery Sater, a concrete emplacement built in 1904 which once housed three 3-inch, 15-pound, rapid-fire guns capable of hitting targets up to 4.5 miles away. Three other batteries can also be found at the park: Battery Mount Vernon, Battery Robinson, and Battery Porter.



Figure 2: Battery Sater at Fort Hunt Park

Between [mile 5.7](#) and [mile 5.9](#), the Mount Vernon Trail merges with the road in a residential area. Signs will direct cyclists where to turn to stay on the trail.

At mile 8, I made a short detour to visit [Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve](#). Bicycles are not permitted here so I locked mine up at the [trailhead](#) and then did a woodland walk on a 0.75-mile-long old dirt mining road

called the Haul Road Trail. The Preserve is a popular birding hotspot -over 270 species of birds have been spotted there in recent years.

At mile 9.3, the Mount Vernon Trail passes under the Washington, D.C. beltway (Highway 495). Plentiful parking and access to [Jones Point Park](#) make this an ideal location for those who don't mind beginning their ride near the midpoint. Jones Point was once home to the Virginia Shipbuilding Corporation, a thriving shipyard built in 1918 in response to a shortage of ships during World War I. Since the end of the war, the tidal marsh in this protected cove has made a strong comeback as a wildlife haven and home to plant species rarely seen in densely populated areas, like river bulrush and soft fox sedge. With the area going back to its more natural state, little remains to remind visitors of the rich history at this location, except for information signs and the [Jones Point Lighthouse](#), which was built 1855-1856 and operational until 1926.



*Figure 3: Jones Point Lighthouse at Jones Point Park*

The 2.3-mile stretch through Old Town Alexandria (mile 9.3-11.6), can be a bit confusing, merging as it does with the road in a quaint historic district full of shops, restaurants, an art center, and a few bike shops.

There were painted bicycle symbols on the road and some signs to help direct cyclists through town, but I felt more would have been helpful. Fortunately, there are several streets that can take you where you want to go, so as long as you head north and stay east of N. Washington Street (which overlaps with the George Washington Memorial Parkway in Old Town Alexandria), you will come back to the Mount Vernon Trail.

Old Town Alexandria is a great place to explore. Starting as a small tobacco warehouse in 1732, it became an official port of entry in 1779. During my ride, I stumbled across an interesting historic structure...the Wilkes Street Tunnel. Named after an English statesman who helped lead the American colonies against King George III, this tunnel, completed in 1856, linked the Orange & Alexandria Railroad to the waterfront.



*Figure 4: Wilkes Street Tunnel in Old Town Alexandria*

At mile 14.7 (this could vary depending on the route you take through Old Town Alexandria), I arrived at Gravelly Point, a popular park which has a lot to offer: a boat ramp, bicycle rental stations, and an open field for sports. This destination is also considered one of the best spots in the country for plane watching, due to

being just a few hundred feet from the north end of runway 1/19 at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport.



*Figure 5: Plane watching at Gravelly Point*

At mile 15.7, I arrived at Lady Bird Johnson Park, formerly known as Columbia Island, where I saw the Navy and Marine Memorial, then rode through the Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) Memorial Grove on the Potomac. I thought I might find a statue to recognize our 36<sup>th</sup> president, but instead I found a “living” memorial comprised of natural elements and landscaping. A stone monolith was erected to mark the place where LBJ and the First Lady came to enjoy their favorite view of our nation’s capital.



*Figure 6: Monolith at LBJ Memorial Grove on the Potomac*

The Mount Vernon Trail is a multi-use trail so in addition to bicyclists, expect to see pedestrians and skaters. With the exception of motorized wheelchairs, motorized vehicles are not permitted.



*Figure 7: Joggers enjoying the multi-use Mount Vernon Trail*

One should exercise caution at mile 16.7 because the two-lane trail bottlenecks down to one for about 100 feet as it passes under the Arlington Memorial Bridge. Completed in 1932, many consider this Washington, D.C.'s most beautiful bridge.





Figure 8: Caution! The trail narrows under Arlington Memorial Bridge

At mile 17.5, I arrived at the pedestrian bridge leading to [Theodore Roosevelt Island](#). When the island was purchased in the early 18th century, it was called Analostan Island, to recognize the seventeenth-century Necostin Native American tribe which once inhabited it. Bikes are not permitted on the island, so I set forth on foot to check out the dirt paths and visit Memorial Plaza, home to an 18-foot bronze statue dedicated to our 26<sup>th</sup> president.



Figure 9: Statue of Theodore Roosevelt at Theodore Roosevelt Island

Venturing onward, I finally came to the anti-climactic northern trail terminus (mile 18) at [N. Lynn Street and Langston Boulevard](#) which lies at the edge of a busy business section of Arlington, Virginia. Just across N. Lynn Street, the four-mile long [Martha Custis Trail](#) begins.

I finished my day by riding back to Mount Vernon, biking a total distance of 42 miles. My trip wouldn't have been so long had I not ventured off the trail to explore, but where's the fun in that? Those looking for a shorter ride can organize a car shuttle with their friends to do a one-way trip or complete the ride over multiple days, starting at different locations; this is easy due to the numerous parking lots along the way. Those without a vehicle or bicycle can make use of [public transportation and bike rental](#) to enjoy the trail.

After riding the Mount Vernon Trail, I concluded that its real beauty lies not in the trail itself, but what it connects. If you just bike from Mount Vernon Estate to Theodore Roosevelt Island without spending time any of the sites along the way, then you're truly missing out, because the trail is more than just a nine-foot-wide paved path...it is a connector to American History.

For more information see

[National Park Service – Mount Vernon Trail](#)

[Friends of the Mount Vernon Trail – Trail History](#)

[National Park Service – Fort Hunt Park](#)

[National Park Service – Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve](#)

[Friends of Dyke Marsh](#)

[Audubon – Birding in Virginia](#)

[National Park Service – Jones Point Park](#)

[National Park Service – The Alexandria Waterfront](#)

[NOVA – Beyond a “Ruinous Condition:” Alexandria’s Historic Wilkes Street Tunnel \(Part 1\)](#)

[Virginia is for Lovers – Gravelly Point](#)

[National Park Service – Lady Bird Johnson Park](#)

[Greater Greater Washington – Lost Washington: Analostan](#)