

Old Homes Week

Not far from Washington, DC, north Virginia showcases grand pioneer homes including George Washington's Mount Vernon

• By Don Wall



This page: besides Washington's mansion, there are more than a dozen outbuildings in total at Mount Vernon. Next page: Jordan Harris of Tarara Winery conducts a wine-tasting; Tysons Galleria mall in Tysons Corner features all the upscale retailers that serious shoppers value including a two-storey American Girl outlet complete with cafeteria/bistro. Don Wall photos. **See photos of Morven Park on page 19.**

An hour south of Washington, DC, in Loudoun and Fairfax Counties, they do wealth in a stealthy way.

The first and second impressions of the two regions are not of conspicuous consumption, of extravagant opulence, of the sort that a boat ride along the Intracoastal Waterway in Florida or a drive through Beverly Hills in California tends to create. Rather, a few days spent touring the area's immaculate small towns and upscale malls, the tidy businesses, manicured homes, elegant wineries and well-kept historic sites, conveys an overall impression of modest confidence, of citizens who might have lots of disposable income but certainly don't strut with unbecoming American swagger.

You wouldn't immediately guess it but Loudoun County has the highest median income, by a fair margin, of America's 3,144 counties and county-equivalents. According to the 2012 American



Community Survey, the median income in Loudoun was almost \$118,000, and its neighbour Fairfax County was third on the list at \$107,000. (Manhattan, New York City was tops when measured by per-capita income.)

The two counties are located eight or nine hours south of Toronto, less than 800 kilometres away, thus convenient as a stopover destination for a snowbird in transit to the Sun Belt. They're often referred to as suburbs of Washington, home to thousands of highly paid government workers and well-connected

contractors, but the term does not do the region justice. What suburbs do you know that are home to vast historic home sites like Mount Vernon, the sprawling compound along the Potomac River where George Washington lived, or Morven Park, the pastoral 1,000-acre property in Leesburg that was the home of former Virginia governor Westmoreland Davis? When you think of a suburb, you don't think of Manassas National Battlefield Park, a 5,000-acre expanse that was the site of the First and Second Battles of Manassas (also known as the Battles of Bull Run) during the U.S. Civil War.

Mount Vernon is full value for its ranking as the most-visited historic home in the U.S. Set aside a half day or more to tour the mansion house, its 14 rooms presented as they were in 1799, the last year of Washington's life, with many original furnishings and numerous historical objects and pieces of artwork; the renovated gardens, pioneer farm blacksmith shop, slaves' quarters and Washington's



Tomb; and the extensive galleries, theatres and education centre and museum. There are more than a dozen outbuildings in total. Washington's distillery and gristmill are located five kilometres away and entry is part of the Mount Vernon admission fee. The first U.S. President apparently took great interest in overseeing research to improve crops and also to develop products in the distillery.

On our tour, the guide volunteered a take on the fact that Washington was a slave owner, saying, "We don't hide the fact," but still, you shake your head walking past the slaves' lodgings. Three-hundred-plus slaves worked six days a week spinning wool and linen, laundering clothes, preparing foods, curing meats, cooking and performing the other chores required to keep a 5,000-acre plantation running. Washington's

will mandated they be freed upon his wife Martha's death.

If Mount Vernon was state-of-the-art in agriculture over 200 years ago then Tarara Winery, the boutique winery managed by Canadian winemaker Jordan Harris, is at the leading edge of north Virginia's burgeoning viniculture today. The local wine industry is only three decades old but there are now dozens of wineries that are respectable producers, and so taking a day or two for a wine tour is definitely worthwhile. If you do, Tarara should be on it. Harris, 33, exuded likable arrogance during a wine-tasting, as befits a whiz kid who won all sorts of awards during his days in the Niagara region and has continued since moving his family to Loudoun County in 2007, including being ranked among Wine Enthusiast's 40 Under 40 Tastemakers.



Harris says that rather than sell mediocre wine during a year when it happens that the grapes do not adequately showcase Tarara, he will scrap the batch.

Another focus of a trip to north Virginia could well be shopping. Here is where the wealth of Loudoun and Fairfax counties is clearly manifested. Tysons Galleria in Tysons Corners is definitely up-up-upscale, anchored by Neiman Marcus, Macy's and Saks Fifth Avenue and featuring the only outlets for Versace, Chanel, De Beers, Tory Burch and the like in the Baltimore-Washington area. The American Girl shop is two storeys and has its own bistro.

Meanwhile, Reston, in Fairfax County, is a spectacularly successful master-planned community that has kind of a *Truman Show* vibe to it, given that it is not an incorporated municipality but rather a corporate creation. Community festivals in Reston Town Center, which was developed by Mobil Land Development starting in 1988, are undertaken by special-events staff, and downtown retailers are not typical hardware stores but rather the likes of Victoria's Secret and The Apple Store. There is zero manufacturing; instead, the information sector is Reston's top employer, and the town boasts Google and Rolls Royce North America as tenants. As communities go, it seems non-organic and unreal. But that's just me – in 2012, Reston was ranked seventh by CNN Money Magazine in its Best Place to Live in America rankings.

For information on Fairfax County, go to fxva.com; for Loudoun County, visitloudoun.com.

DON'T MISS: Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum

Located in Chantilly, VA. This 760,000-square-foot museum's collection includes nearly 3,000 artifacts and archival materials that chronicle the history of aviation and spaceflight, including the Space Shuttle Discovery, the B-29 bomber Enola Gay, a Canadarm and NASA android, and the record-setting SR-71 Blackbird.