

Chapter 1

Thursday, November 21, 2019, Pre-dawn

John Mason never dreamed of meeting Martha Washington, but on a numbing cold day in 2019 she introduced herself to him privately and his unexceptional life marched back in time to the Revolutionary War.

Mason, an historical detective and architectural engineer in private practice, and former staff member at George Washington's Mount Vernon, had been asked to bring his expertise temporarily back to the famous estate. Mount Vernon performed all of their maintenance internally and rarely, if ever, used any outside or independent services. But because of the sudden loss of their staff expert serving as their head architectural and structural preservationist, they called upon the services of John Mason, who had been fully vetted and was quite familiar with the famous buildings at the historical park and national landmark. He would serve as a *pro tem* replacement until the administration at Mount Vernon could interview and hire a new director. To make matters worse, the staff at Mount Vernon had been hit with new strain of flu virus the current vaccinations couldn't prevent. The sick leave at the park was at a disaster level.

A structural issue at Washington's iconic mansion needed immediate attention. John had regularly inspected Mount Vernon's historical mansion, outbuildings, and grounds for their public safety and need for periodic repairs. He had arranged to have access to the park before it opened to the public and work alone. He had arrived before dawn when the estate was practically deserted, as was his habit. Working without distractions was necessary to efficiently focus on his work. The morning cold had collided with the warmer air at the river, making for columns of fog rising like ghosts from the Potomac.

First on the agenda was the work to be done in the mansion. Assessments needed to be made and repairs implemented. Later he would be joined by a team of staff members to address and repair any problems and carry out more building inspections.

Mount Vernon was a magical place to John; the home of our nation's greatest leader. To him, the grounds of the estate were laid out as majestically as Buckingham Palace or the Palace at Versailles. The mansion, the center of the property, overlooked from on high the wide Potomac River and the land for miles in every direction. Two curved arms, the beautiful arched colonnades, extended from the mansion's front like huge arms gathering in all who stood upon its acre of manicured lawn. A straight avenue called "The Lane," paralleled the front of the mansion some hundred yards away and provided access, north and south, to the several outbuildings with their bright white paint and brick red roofs. These buildings included a stable

for teams of horses, a salt house, a smokehouse, a wash house, a spinning house, and more. The estate was a botanical garden, a farmland of tobacco and many edible crops, and even had its own distillery, gristmill, and blacksmith shop. Originally built by Augustine Washington, George's father, in 1734, when the infant Father of Our Nation was only two. Winter ice was brought up from the Potomac and stored in an icehouse, providing welcome cold for keeping perishables and cooling drinks. The estate even maintained its own graves and tombs. To John, there was no place on earth like it and being there again made his job joyful and his love for the place manifold.

A November chill had arrived as the holidays approached and he would be needed at the site until well after Christmas. He began with the imposing mansion itself where a problem with the main floor had been reported. Since it was by far the attraction most visited by tourists, the administration's concern about loose flooring was high. While testing the structural integrity of the floors, beams and joists beneath the major tour paths of the rooms above, he entered a storage area where hundreds of artifacts, dating from George Washington's days at the estate, were stored and preserved. He had visited that room many times over the years, but something peculiar happened on this day.

An embroidered sampler hung in a dark corner that caught his attention as his LED flashlight beamed its way. Without the aid of the bright light he would never have paid it any mind, but curiosity drew him closer to get a better look. The sampler contained a short poem, as they commonly did in colonial times in a needlecraft shared by many home artisans.

The sampler was in a protective glass case and contained decorative stitching of a bird in flight, two horses, and a row of brightly colored flowers. A simple message stitched in verse occupied its center:



He paid little more attention to the dusty linen artwork except to note that, in all his visits, he had never seen it, and was surprised that it had been signed in needlework by Martha Washington. Perhaps the curator had shifted things around in the storage room boxes and had decided to hang it up to protect it from damage. Or maybe there was a movement afoot to change the interior décor of the mansion by using some of the other items that may have once adorned the living quarters. The eerie aspect of the discovery was how his flashlight homed in its beam directly at it, and dwelled on it, until he threaded his way through stacks of boxes to get closer. It had beckoned him strongly for reasons he didn't understand. Something also prompted him to take a photo of it with his cell phone.

John spotted the weakness in the support system for the main floor and photographed the sagging beam and made notes detailing its need for remedy. He worked his way through the lower level, essentially a basement created by George Washington for storage and an expanded pantry and wine cellar. There was no evidence of water damage and the plaster walls were dry and free of structural cracks. The construction used in Washington's day was made to last, and often over-built, but joists and beams had been reinforced in recent times in anticipation of growing tourism, increasing with each passing year.

He climbed the stairs to the main floor and began checking the doorways and windows for racking, a clear indication of structural movement. By measuring the windows and door frames diagonally in two directions he could determine if any were out of square. All seemed sound and free from any change from his past inspections three years ago.

The upper floor, another innovation designed and built by George, had maintained its integrity and the ceiling, dormers, cupola, and roof showed no signs of leaks or damage.

John followed a regular itinerary across the estate that always began with the mansion and ended with the outbuildings. Next on his list was the blacksmith shop, a relatively new reconstruction of the original smithy, completed in 2009.

Chapter 2

Thursday, November 21, 2019, sunrise

The blacksmith shop was built a healthy hike of eighty yards northeast of the mansion for obvious reasons: the frequent sessions of loud hammering on metal being one, and the smell of the forge fire and its acrid smoke would be another. Placing the smithy at a distance from the main house allowed for reasonable insulation from the noise, and breezes off the Potomac could adequately dissipate unwelcome fumes apt to drift into the living quarters were it nearby.



The shop required careful inspection since it dealt with intense heat directly against fire pit mortar that eroded over time from the high temperature needed to forge iron, often over 2,500 degrees Fahrenheit. He took a brick jointer from his oversize backpack and scraped and prodded the masonry of the furnace's brickwork to make sure it was sound and adequately insulated the wood structure of the building from contact with the heat.

The earthy interior was filled with the many tools required to create the needed metal items used by the estate. Hammers, pry bars, tongs, and coal surrounded the forge and main anvil. Finished work pieces hung on the walls and a rustic bench vise sat on the left side of the room where a worker could straddle the device and exert holding pressure on a work piece by pressing his foot against a lever near the floor. A primitive, but quite effective in its day.

A yellow memo on the blacksmith's workbench drew his eye and he picked it up and read it. It warned the blacksmith to help the kitchen actors during today's tours by overseeing the lighting of the fireplace. Nothing unusual. The kitchen fireplace was often made practical, especially on busy cold weekends with heavy attendance. He replaced the memo, which had alerted him that the kitchen would need to be a top priority on his inspection schedule.

He continued to move about the perimeter of the outer walls of the smithy and checked their integrity, as well as the upper structure of the interior ceiling and rafters. After an hour, all seemed in fine order so he made his way back to the array of outbuildings surrounding the mansion and, in particular, the estate's kitchen.

Practically all cooking for the estate had taken place in this building, which occupied the southeast side of the mansion's colonnade. Ever a busy place during the occupancy of the estate's owners, the kitchen bustled with food preparation on a par with the most exclusive restaurants. Now it existed as a major tour point and its fireplace and companion oven were rarely lit. But decades of former use often left cracked plaster, crumbling mortar, and bricks that

needed replacement. Today, perhaps, it would contain fiery logs to heat up a large cast iron pot of hot soup for visitors.

John entered the darkened kitchen and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. The atmosphere inside carried the smell of burnt wood. The fireplace would get his attention first since it was going to contain a roaring fire later that day. His flashlight searched for cracks in the stone interior and any damage or blockages in the flue. The oven, a few feet to the right of the fireplace was next. The heat generated in the oven was more controllable, but wherever there was fire required sharp inspection. The oven walls were tap-checked with John's rubber hammer and proved to be cured hard and sound. The floor had been excavated, the soil re-packed, and covered with stone pavers back around 1959. After six decades it still was solid and capable of handling heavy traffic.



Satisfied that all was safe for practical fires in the kitchen, John moved on to one of his favorite sites: the coach house at the stable.

Chapter 3

Thursday, November 21, 2019, early morning

The coach house occupied the center portion between the two stables at either end of the large brick building, a structure that was second only to the mansion in square footage. The beautiful carriage inside was one similar to George Washington's original model that had been mysteriously lost. The rare replacement once belonged to Samuel Powel, the mayor of Philadelphia, and his wife Elizabeth, and was believed to have been crafted by Washington's original coach makers.

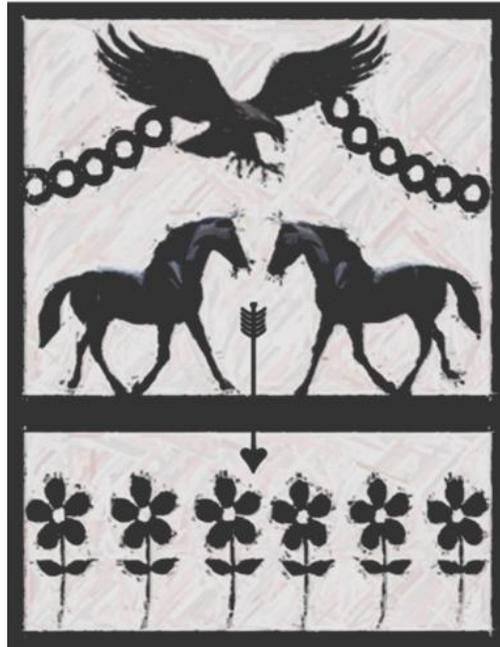
The woodwork was a piece of portable art with polished red mahogany, light wood inlays, and hand painted gold pin-striping. Cinderella couldn't have ridden to the prince's ball in a more elegant vehicle.



An object on the back wall of the room caught John's eye. Another piece of artwork he had never seen before in that space. John scuffed himself around the large rear wheel of the carriage and stepped to the wall where the piece was bolted and studied it for a moment with his flashlight.

It had been fashioned out of black wrought iron and depicted an eagle, horses, and flowers. John realized, as he stood near the object, that for the second time in a matter of hours he had encountered something that had depicted the same three distinct images.

He took out his cell and reviewed the shot he'd taken of the sampler. They were very similar, but the wrought iron piece contained an additional feature: an arrow pointing downward, with no apparent connection to the other objects within its frame.



For historical authenticity, various forged pieces hung on the many walls at Mount Vernon: racks, horseshoes, hinges, pot hooks, wheel rims, and other ironware the estate regularly would've used. But this one was unique, not a piece of functional hardware. His mind jumped to the sampler's poem which cited the power of horses, the majesty of wings in flight, and flowers that bloomed and hid from the light. The poem also spoke of "love's memories" that "lie near a course." *What memories lie near a course? What was "the course?" A golf course? Was the arrow pointing to the "course" where I'm standing, the ground near a course of bricks?*

John had to know more. Imaginary spiders crawled on the skin on his arms as he took an extra-long screwdriver from his tool kit and began poking the earth directly beneath the wrought iron artwork. He jabbed the softer ground beneath the crusty top layer in several places with no results, but in a final deep plunge he struck something hard about ten inches down. John traded his screwdriver for a small hand spade from his backpack and dug until his blade clanged into something metallic. A few more sweeping strokes and the corner of a metal box revealed itself as his digging quickened with each scoop of earth. A rectangular container the size of a large cigar box revealed itself in the hole. He carefully pulled it out and rested it on the floor. He stared at it for several seconds, his mind spinning. John was not certain why, but a strong instinct compelled him to keep his discovery secret. His heart was coming out of his chest as he hurried to refill the hole where the box had lain, but quickly realized that there would not be enough soil to compensate for the space the box had occupied. An obvious depression remained. John would

need to return and fill the hole properly on another visit. For now, the rear wheel of the carriage would almost hide the imperfection in the floor.

The box appeared to be tin-coated and was thickly sealed with wax around its overlapping lid. The box was not heavy like one might expect of buried treasure. He gave it a gentle shake. Very little sound came from within. Whatever hid inside was decidedly not gold bullion or doubloons. John decided not to try to open it yet and dug into his backpack to conceal it. The backpack was nearly full with his test equipment, note pads, tools, and a camera. The pack's tight-woven nylon composition did not allow for stretching. The box wasn't going to fit in the bag no matter how many ways he turned it and no matter how much he forced other items aside to create more room. Frustrated, he abruptly stopped and sensed something that sent shivers snaking down his back. He slowly turned his gaze toward the entrance.

A man he knew well stood in the wide doorway staring at him.

* * *

Walt Kincaid, one of the park's security officers, smiled menacingly and stepped inside the room. His massive presence projected a figure of intimidation. John knew him from his former days at Mount Vernon, and his memory of the boorish man was not a pleasant one.

"Find some of ole Georgie's hidden treasures?" the heavy-set man asked.

John stared at Walt's small, piercing eyes, a characteristic he always associated with meanness. His brain fumbled for an explanation and he finally jabbered a reply.

"I'm not really sure what I've found here, Walt. May be something important, may be a box of junk one of the stable re-enactors buried. Who knows? Won't know for sure 'til the historical authorities get a look inside."

"Why don't *we* take a peek right now?"

"The box is sealed up tight. Better leave opening it to the experts."

"S'pose it's gold and jewels," Walt said and moved closer.

"Oh, I don't think so. It's not heavy ... barely two pounds, I'd say."

He frantically made one last attempt to cram the box into the bag by removing his bulky camera. The box slid in just enough to close the zipper.

"Better get some shots of the place where it was found," John said, the impromptu ad lib fitting in perfectly with the camera in his hand. John aimed his camera toward the rear wall and snapped several shots around the area.

"Well, you be sure to let me know what they find. After all, I am a security officer here. I think I should see things that's taken from the grounds."

John felt compelled to take the offense, even if what he asserted was a stretch of the truth.

"You're absolutely right ... under most circumstances, but as the Chief Architectural Engineer of the park, I need to pull a little rank on you. The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association

is going to want to know every detail of how and where this was discovered. Technically, their oversight remains within the confines of the park, but all discoveries and alterations fall within my purview.”

“You’ll tell me what you found?”

“Give you a full report, my friend,” he said and pushed past the big man and strode out the door.

John believed one thing was certain: Whatever was in that box in his backpack would keep Walt Kincaid on the scent like a coyote chasing down a wounded rabbit.

* * *

Thursday, November 21, 2019, morning to early afternoon

John always strove to finish up his daily work by the time the park opened its doors to the public. He had borrowed office space and desk in the back of the gift shop and made his notations with the results of his inspections that day. The next group of buildings to be checked filled a page of notes and would be visited in a day or two. The repairs required in the mansion would be made under the supervision of a staff team and carried out immediately. Upcoming holidays gave him a lot of latitude to schedule his remaining work any way he desired. It was good to be “The Chief.”

A favorite diner on the way home served up the best country ham breakfast in the Alexandria area. John was running on two cups of coffee all morning and was ready to take in something more substantial. Later, the box in the backpack in his Jeep Cherokee pushed out all other thoughts as he worked on the ham, red eye gravy, grits, and biscuits. He stared out the window at his vehicle and conjured up guesses as to what was inside the metal box. He hoped it wasn’t previously owned by a gal named Pandora.

The pre-noon drive home to Arlington relied on automatic pilot. John disregarded the traffic, the road conditions, or the prattle from talk radio. He had tried to dismiss it as nothing important by stopping for breakfast and treating the whole discovery as a very casual event. But his brain was completely focused on that metal box on the back seat. He could attempt to play mental games of misdirection, but he could feel that box throbbing behind him like it was alive.

What am I going to do? Should I remove the wax seal and open the box? Who would know if I got rid of the wax? Who would be the wiser? Suppose there was actual treasure in the box, old money, bonds, or property deeds? I’m not a poor man, but could there be something in that box that could change my life for the better financially? Set me up for life? Or get me sent up for life? Only one other person on Earth knows about the box. How can I get him to keep our secret? Why am I planning this dishonesty? What’s with all this scheming? What’s wrong with me? Dear God, I’m acting like a criminal. That’s not what I’m about. If I steal and use what’s in that box

as mine, I am a criminal. What would my wife and children think if I became nothing but a pathetic opportunist?

I may wish I'd never found that box.

Somehow, without being conscious of the miles his Jeep Cherokee had traveled, he pulled into his driveway, hit the garage door remote, and parked. When the garage door sealed shut, he closed his eyes and pressed his head against his hands gripping the steering wheel.

A box on his back seat had become the most exciting thing in his universe. He would go to bed tonight and think. Think about everything about this day. Tomorrow he would decide what to do. But he wondered if sleep would even come.

Chapter 4

Friday, November 22, 2019, mid-morning

John had overslept after a restless night. The clock on the nightstand showed 9:23 AM. He swung his legs out of the bed and planted his feet on the carpet. His usual bathroom routine got severely shortened and he scurried down the stairs and entered the garage.

John brought the utility bag in from the car and placed it on the desk in his home office. The house was empty. Jenny had left for Georgetown University where she taught American history. The kids, Ryan and Hannah, were away at college.

His head was full of disjointed fuzzy intentions as he walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator and peered inside. He was unsure of what he wanted or why he was even there. Coffee had to be brewed and took time. The spring water grabbed his attention and he took a bottle back to the office. After he downed a long drink, he unzipped his backpack. He gazed for several seconds at the metal box. Its dull shine reminded him of a pewter sewing box his mother owned. He slowly pulled it out and placed it on the desk. It held no more apparent worthiness than a cookie tin, but his stomach was quivering like he'd swallowed a bird. The box was gray, plain, and blemished with splotches of erosion, like a tiny pet coffin long buried in acidic soil.



John's gaze fell on a photo of his son and daughter from a recent visit. Ryan was twenty and a junior at UCLA. Hannah was a freshman at UVA. Great kids, who had earned scholarships to ease the financial burden of higher education. His wife Jenny, a professor with a PhD, would soon be eligible for tenure. His family was everything to him, but right now John was glad to be alone. After several minutes of mental wrangling, he decided to do the right thing.

John called the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. There was a person there who was well acquainted with his work and his loyalty to historical preservation.

"Mount Vernon," a pleasant female voice said.

"Regent Pamela Bond, please," John said and waited for a response. A few moments later a woman answered.

"Pamela Bond."

"Ms Bond, this is John Mason."

"Mr. Mason, what can I do for you?"

"I discovered a mysterious box in the coach house yesterday and thought you should know about it."

"What kind of box? And where exactly did you find it?"

"A sampler made by Martha Washington hung in the storage room in the mansion's basement contained a poem that spoke of horses, birds, and flowers ..."

"I am familiar with the piece," Pamela said. "What of it?"

"Well, later I was inspecting the structure of the coach house and saw a piece of wrought iron artwork on the back wall that contained the exact items cited in the sampler poem. I thought it coincidental, but odd. But the iron piece also contained a down arrow pointing to the floor next to the brick wall."

"And this is significant why?" Pamela asked.

"It would have meant nothing if I left it at that, but I decided to delve further and probed the ground beneath the arrow. A few plunges with a long screwdriver struck something metallic and I dug it up."

“A horseshoe, no doubt?”

“A tin container about the size of a large cigar box.”

“What was in the box?”

“It’s heavily wax-sealed. I dared not open it until I spoke with you.”

“You have this box with you now?”

“Yes,” John said and anxiously waited for some excitement from the regent and directions as to what to do next.

“Mr. Mason, whatever you have found is nothing from the 18th century. Almost every building at Mount Vernon has had its floor excavated, scientifically examined, and reconstructed with proper materials to ensure its authenticity and serviceability. Every wall from roof to ground has been scrutinized surgically. There could be no buried box in the coach house that is of any historical importance.”

“Maybe the excavations were not fully performed from wall to wall.”

“Not likely, sir. It’s hopeless to think anything of any historical significance would be found in any of our outbuildings. Practically impossible.”

“What would you like me to do with this unimportant box?” John asked.

“Open it. Let’s see.” Pamela said. “I’ll wait.”

John slid out the blade on his utility knife and worked it under the dark wax surrounding the lid. Next, he made a cut completely through the thick band. The wax around the box took some effort to peel away and surprised John by the strength of its grip on the aged metal.

Next came a tense moment as he slowly removed the reluctant lid, his heart pounding in his chest. The first thing he saw, resting on top of two rows of what appeared to be upright envelopes, was a folded paper, five inches wide, amber with age with a blue wax seal that depicted an eagle’s head.

“Mr. Mason? What’s in the box? I have an important meeting to attend,” Pamela asked, impatience in her tone.

John immediately took issue with her shortness and her lack of concern for the discovery. His pique with her indifference quickly escalated to genuine anger. He decided not to relate to her what he saw in the box.

“Looks like you were right. Regent Bond. It’s just a bunch of advertisements for horse equipment and riding items; saddles, bridles, and the like. All very modern stuff.”

“As advertised,” Pamela said. “Bring it by when you’re near the office. I’ll have to tell others that I at least looked at it.”

“Will do,” John said and heard the click on the phone ending the call

He knew better than to touch anything in the box without proper care and went downstairs to his shop to get several pairs of the cotton gloves he used to work on his antique firearms.

On his return, he slipped on the gloves and delicately picked up the sealed document and turned it over.



The opposite side displayed six handwritten words:

To the finder of this box

John turned the document back to the seal side and gently laid it on the desk. He got a retractable razor knife from his tool kit and stared at the ancient paper like it might disintegrate before his eyes. Reluctantly, he sliced under the round wax seal like a surgeon in a critical life-and-death procedure and opened the letter, which, with its four sides unfolded, was actually the interior of its envelope. A musty smell rose from the document. The writing was a right-slanted cursive in brown ink. It read:

You have uncovered and revealed the resting place of a long ago lie, now reversed. I often proclaimed that these letters which rest within, and others, were destroyed. I can only surmise that you witness this box because you encountered the sampler I had willed to be displayed openly upon the year 1876. That year will be one century from the beginning of our great War of Independence. These letters, and there are twelve more such boxes secreted on the grounds, span more than the seven year duration of the war from its beginning to its end. I firmly believe that Mount Vernon will be preserved as a historical estate, and yet exist as it was in my time. Assuming that, I have provided instructions and a map of the grounds to help you, which contain clues you will need to solve the complete puzzle.

It will now be the time to reveal to you, their new heir, what was withheld as the personal exchanges of two figures who prominently took part in the opposition to the British in this conflict and the contents therein which, if found when they were set down, could have given advantage to the enemy.

I pray that God will preserve these exchanges of leaders and lovers in that cause, and that America will yet be united, alive, and strong after so long these words have slept.

I pray they will remember us fondly.

Martha Washington

John stared at the words in disbelief. He knew the Washingtons' history well, but this discovery had his mind reeling. Was it possible that this was actually an exchange of letters written during the Revolutionary War by General George Washington and his beloved wife Martha? Letters long believed to have been destroyed by Martha, save the handful displayed in historical archives?

John danced his fingertips across the row of folded letters and made an approximate count from front to back. There were at least sixty letters in the box. He had read that Martha and George wrote weekly during the war, which could total hundreds exchanged during the seven-plus years of the conflict.

He removed and read several of the letters. They were brittle and several had cracks developing at the folds and edges. He carefully returned each fragile one into the box and replaced the snug metal lid. He pressed his unsteady hands firmly on the box to ensure its closure, and then dropped into his desk chair off wobbly legs.

Why had Martha's sampler never been seen before? Had it been displayed, as Martha had directed, in the year 1876 in keeping with her wishes or had it only recently been revealed? And why had it made its appearance so humbly in a private storage room?

The contents of the box outweighed any treasure chest brimming with gold and precious gems. And the age of the letters made it imperative to limit their handling to as little as possible.

When he regained his composure and stood, the floor beneath him seemed to tremble like he was on rickety elevator. He clutched the edge of the desk to steady himself as he stared at the box. A nerve shudder rippled up from his lower back and raised hackles on the nape of his neck.

John realized that the tin container he stood before could hold a first-hand story of the birth of the United States of America. And there were *twelve more* boxes of them. All the more reason to fear the dire consequences of their illegal possession.