

George Washington Birthplace

National Park Service
U. S. Department of the Interior



George Washington Birthplace
National Monument
Westmoreland County, Virginia

George Washington's Birthday



George Washington was born at Popes Creek Plantation in February 1732. He was the oldest child of Augustine and Mary Ball Washington and was followed by 3 brothers and 2 sisters. His father made the family's living by growing tobacco and holding an interest in an iron production business.

Mary Ball had been orphaned as a child, and it is generally

believed that she named her first son after her guardian, a local lawyer and statesman named George Eskridge.

George Washington spent the first 3 formative years of his life on his father's plantation and would return as an adolescent to visit his older half brother, Augustine, Junior. It was here at Popes Creek that George performed his first survey at 14.

February 11, 1731 or February 22, 1732?

“Presidents’ Day” or Washington’s Birthday?

By the Julian calendar, which was in general use in Great Britain and her colonies in the early 18th century, George Washington was born on February 11, 1731/2. March 25th (the Feast of the Incarnation of Christ) had earlier been celebrated as the start of the New Year, but Washington's contemporaries celebrated that holiday on January 1. The year, then, was expressed 1731/2.

On December 31, 1751 Great Britain officially switched from the Julian to the more widely accepted Gregorian Calendar. Switching to the *Christian* or Gregorian Calendar required the addition of 11 more days to the year 1752, and retroactive re-dating moved Washington's birthday back to the familiar date of February 22, 1732.

Washington's service to his

country and high esteem among his countrymen prompted many of them to honor and celebrate his birthday while he was still alive. Some still chose the 11th (Old Style) while others the 22nd.

February 22 was observed as a federal public holiday until 1971 when President Richard Nixon declared that in order to honor all past presidents, a single holiday to be called *Presidents' Day* would be observed on the 3rd Monday in February.

Due to the legal mechanism that President Nixon used, the name Presidents' Day never became the permanent name of the holiday, and the day is still properly called George Washington's Birthday on all official Federal Government calendars and writings.

Ironically, the 22nd can never occur on the 3rd Monday in February.



Washington's Birthday Becomes the First American Holiday



In 1778, in the midst of the War for Independence, the first public celebration of Washington's Birthday took place at Valley Forge. A band of fifers and drummers from Proctor's Artillery serenaded General Washington at his quarters.

In 1781 the French at Newport held a parade in Washington's honor. The French celebrated it on Monday, February 23rd to

avoid holding the event on a Sunday. Washington wrote to Count Rochambeau that, "The flattering distinction paid to the anniversary of my birthday is an honor for which I dare not attempt to express my gratitude. I confide in your sensibilities to interpret my feelings for this, and for the obliging manner in which you are pleased to announce it."

George Washington's Birthnight Ball

The custom of the Birthnight Ball originated in Britain to commemorate and celebrate the birthday of the king. Following the Declaration of Independence, Americans continued this tradition. Absent a monarch, Americans turned to the next closest figure, George Washington.

The first recorded Washington Birthnight Ball was held in Williamsburg in 1779.

Papers of the day reported that Alexandria was the site of a ball in honor of

Washington's birthday on February 11, 1780.

The Feb. 7, 1797 issue of *The Times and Alexandria Advertiser* invited all "Ladies of Alexandria and its vicinity" to Gadsby's Tavern and informed gentlemen as to where they could purchase tickets for Washington's Birthnight Ball to be held in 3 days. Since he was in Philadelphia still serving as President, the General could not attend.

Washington's Birthday Lives On

1832 – For the 100th anniversary of Washington's birth, the famed Orator Daniel Webster declared that, "A hundred years hence, other disciples of Washington will celebrate his birth, with no less of sincere admiration than we now commemorate it."

1839 – Louisiana declared February 22 as a "Day of Grace."

1857 – February 22 is designated a state holiday in Massachusetts.

1880 – George Washington's Birthday was first observed as a Federal holiday.

1932 – The George Washington Bicentennial Commission was formed to coordinate almost 5 million events in 81 countries. One example was the deeding of Washington's Birthplace to the National Park Service.



Memorial House dedication in 1932 at George Washington Birthplace National Monument