

WAKEFIELD - Birthplace of George Washington

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National Park Service

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George Washington Birthplace NM

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History
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WAKEFIELD - BIRTHPLACE OF GEORGE WASHINGTON

by J. Paul Hudson, Museum Specialist,
National Park Service

"A place of rose and thyme and scented earth,
A place the world forgot,
But here a matchless flower came to birth -
Time paused and blessed the spot."

George Washington was born in his father's home on Popes Creek in Westmoreland County, Virginia, February 22, 1732 — the sixth year in the reign of King George II and the eightieth year in the history of the county. A notation in his mother's Bible recorded the event with brevity:

"George Washington son to Augustine & Mary his wife
was Born y^e 11th Day of February 1731/32 about 10
in the morning and was Baptised the 5th of April
following, Mr. Beverley Whiting & Cap^t Christopher
Brooks godfathers and Mrs. Mildred Gregory godmother."

The date, "11th Day of February," was "Old Style." By the English calendar corrected in 1752, the date was February 22, 1732, "New Style."

The house in which George was born was built by his father, Augustine Washington, between 1723 and 1726, on land purchased from Joseph Abbington in 1717-18.¹ David Jones, a local builder and undertaker, contracted to build the home for 5,000 pounds of tobacco with extra amounts in cash for incidentals. The late Charles A. Hoppin, eminent authority on the Washington family, believed that "the brick for the house had been made by Capt. Washington as well as the foundations

¹ Augustine Washington bought of Joseph Abbington 150 acres of land bounded by Dancing Marsh, Popes Creek, and Nathaniel Washington's line. Henry Brooks first patented the Popes Creek land in 1657. From Henry Brooks the land passed to his son-in-law and daughter, Lawrence and Lydia Abbington. Later it was inherited by Lawrence Abbington, Jr., who left it to Brookes Abbington. From Brookes Abbington the land passed to Joseph Abbington, who sold the property to Augustine Washington in 1717-18.

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for the house before Jones began the general woodwork construction, much of the timber being supplied by the said Washington from the woods on his estate, cut, hauled and sawed by his slaves." David Jones died in 1725 -- before Augustine Washington's home was completed -- and Augustine entered a claim against his estate in which he asked the sum of 500 pounds of tobacco. It may be inferred that the home was completed in 1726, and was six years old at the time of George's birth.

While little is known about the physical appearance of the home where George was born, the foundations and basement floors uncovered during archeological excavations reveal that it was built either partially or entirely of brick. Several outbuildings were found to have brick foundations; the ancient smokehouse had a brick floor as well. All walls, cellar stairways, wine vaults, and fireplaces excavated were built of brick, conclusive evidence that part, if not all, of Augustine Washington's home was a brick structure.

The home must have been fairly commodious, for an inventory of its furnishings made in 1762 lists (in part) 10 beds, 13 tables, 57 chairs, 8 mirrors, 8 chests, tools for 8 fireplaces, and scores of other items befitting a fairly large establishment -- indicating that the Popes Creek house was not the humble one-story clapboard structure sketched in the nineteenth century by a Currier and Ives artist

who probably never visited Virginia and knew little about the social and economic status of George's father.

Augustine Washington, while not a man of great wealth, was able to send two sons to England for schooling. Early 18th century objects unearthed near the foundations of his Popes Creek home indicate that he imported fine furniture, silver, pewter, brassware, drinking vessels, and pottery from the mother country, and could afford to have his monogram stamped on his wine bottles. He was a man of some influence in his community, having held at various times the positions of Justice of Westmoreland County Court, captain in the county militia, Sheriff of Westmoreland County, and a vestryman in his church. He was part-owner of two iron furnaces, and financially able to visit England in 1729 and deal directly with his partners. He owned land and buildings in at least three Virginia counties, and although not as wealthy as certain other planters in the Northern Neck was on an equal footing with them socially.

The first three years of George's life were spent at the Popes Creek plantation.² At some unknown date between March 25, 1735, and November 18, 1735, Augustine Washington moved his family up the Potomac River about 50 miles to his farm on Hunting Creek, known today as Mount Vernon. Three years later Augustine purchased a 288-acre farm near

² In this account the farm where Washington was born is referred to as both the Popes Creek plantation and Wakefield. The name "Wakefield" apparently was given to the plantation about 1773 by William Augustine Washington, and is said to have been suggested by Oliver Goldsmith's Vicar of Wakefield. So far as I have been able to ascertain, George Washington referred to his birthplace as the Popes Creek home or the "ancient mansion seat in Westmoreland County."

Fredericksburg, and the following year (when George was 7) moved his family there. In 1743, a few weeks after George's eleventh birthday, Augustine Washington passed away, and was interred in the family burial ground at Bridges Creek³, located a little over a mile northwest of his old home on Popes Creek where George was born. Augustine Washington left the Popes Creek plantation to his second son and namesake, Augustine, Jr., George's elder half-brother.

There is no definite proof establishing where George lived following his father's death, although it appears that he resided variously with his mother on her farm near Fredericksburg; at his birth home

³ A word regarding the Bridges Creek property, where the family burial ground was located, seems necessary. In 1656 John Washington, founder of the Washington family in America and great-grandfather of George Washington, arrived in the Potomac River off Westmoreland County in the ketch, "Sea Horse of London," and decided to remain in Virginia. Within a short time he married Ann Pope and in 1659 was given land on Mattox Creek by his father-in-law, Colonel Nathaniel Pope. Son of an Oxford graduate and Anglican clergyman, John Washington quickly took rank with the important men of his community. In 1661 he was made a vestryman in his church. The same year he was appointed Coroner, and a year later appointed Justice of Westmoreland County Court. In 1664 a distinct honor was accorded him -- the changing of the name of Appomattox Parish in Westmoreland County to Washington Parish, the one it possesses today. On December 3, 1664, John Washington purchased 100 acres of land on Bridges Creek from David Anderson, and there built his home and established the family burial ground (seventy-eight years later this same tract of land was acquired by George Washington's father, and for the first time became a part of the plantation which subsequently became known as Wakefield). Shortly after purchasing the Bridges Creek property John Washington was made a Colonel in the County Militia, and in 1675 was commissioned to raise troops to conduct a campaign against the Doeg Indians in Maryland. He was a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses on at least two occasions. In 1676 he was commissioned an agent for a Rotterdam firm, and the same year supported the Royal Governor against Nathaniel Bacon's Rebellion. He acquired sizeable tracts of land (including the Mount Vernon property) before passing away in 1677. He was interred at Bridges Creek in the burial plot he established.

on Popes Creek with his elder half-brother, Augustine; at Mount Vernon with brother Lawrence; and at Chotank in King George County with other relatives.

The frequency and length of George's visits to Popes Creek are not known, but there is ~~some~~^{strong} evidence that he lived there with his brother and sister-in-law for long periods of time. During such visits he must have become familiar with every nook and cranny in his birth home, and especially with its outdoor attractions -- the green fields of tobacco, corn, and wheat; the sweet-scented herb garden; the domestic animals; and other aspects of farm life beloved by all boys.

Beyond the cultivated fields grew the dense forests, which a century before had echoed with the cries of the Indian -- a strange race which had lived there for countless centuries, only to be driven off its lands by the white man within the span of a single generation. The dominant trees in the majestic woods were the broadleaf varieties -- oaks, maples, walnuts, holly, dogwoods, persimmons, and poplars -- interspersed with a few species of pine and cedar. Wild game was abundant, and George probably hunted the deer, bear, and wild turkey, as well as the wily 'possum, raccoon, and fox.

Tranquil Popes Creek, which flowed only a stone's throw east of the red brick home, certainly had a special appeal to the growing boy, for in the tall marsh grass along its edge nested the mallards, wood ducks, and wild geese, and under its waters swam large turtles

and many kinds of nimble fish. More inviting than the creek, however, was the broad Potomac River -- at this point six miles wide -- whose southern bank lay less than a mile from the plantation home. Ideal for fishing, swimming, and boating, this wide expanse of tidewater was, without doubt, a delight to young George and his friends.

It is not known when George left the Popes Creek plantation for the last time as a youth, but he must have departed with a heavy heart, for the joys and pleasures of life on a Tidewater plantation, having more than its share of sunny days, must have been unforgettable to the tall, teen-aged youth.

As the Virginia-bred youth grew into the mature Commander-in-Chief of the Revolutionary forces, the home on Popes Creek continued to shelter other members of the Washington family. While Washington and his ragged Continental Army were encamped near Morristown, New Jersey, the Commander-in-Chief's birth home in far-away Virginia accidentally caught fire and burned to the ground. Indirect evidence and tradition indicate that the house was destroyed on Christmas Day, 1779. At the time of the fire the structure was owned by William Augustine Washington, half-nephew of General Washington. According to the owner's daughter, Sarah Tayloe Washington, her father, returning from a ride about midday, noticed the roof burning. It is believed that a spark from the chimney blew through the attic window and set fire to the house. The home was not rebuilt.⁴

⁴ Sarah Tayloe Washington, daughter of the last owner of the birth home, was not living when the Popes Creek home burned. As she was not born until 1800 her account of the fire was given many years later. Nevertheless, there is no reason to doubt her story, as she was ten years of age when her father died, and thirty-three when her mother passed away.

During its half-century span the Popes Creek house was owned by three Washingtons: (1) Augustine, the builder and George's father, who lived in the house between 1726 and 1735; (2) Augustine II, son of the builder and elder half-brother of George, who owned the house from 1743 until his death in 1762; and (3) William Augustine Washington, son of Augustine II and nephew of George, who was living in the house when it burned.

After the disastrous fire at Wakefield, 36 years passed before the birth site was marked. Finally, in 1815, George Washington Parke Custis (a grandson of Martha Washington and a ward of George) visited Popes Creek and, in an imposing ceremony, placed a slab of freestone "where a few scattered bricks alone marked the birthplace of the chief."⁵ The freestone slab bore the following inscription:

Here
The 11th of February, 1732 (Old Style)
George Washington
Was Born

Between 1815 and 1896 the story of Wakefield is one of neglect. In 1832 -- the hundreth anniversary of Washington's birth -- the Alexandria Gazette commented on the isolation of Wakefield: "It is surprising that it should be so little known and visited. Not one in a thousand of passengers in steamboats has any knowledge that this 'solum natale,' of him whom the whole world honors, is . . . but a mile over the waters surface;

⁵ Custis' visit to Popes Creek in 1815 is described with feeling in his own words in Appendix I.

and hid from his view only by a fringe of wild shrubbery."⁶

In 1851 the Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser observed that "The birthplace of George Washington is . . . marked only by an old brick chimney, a mammoth fig tree, and a freestone slab. . . . The slab is broken in two . . . The neglected condition of the spot bears shame against his country for neglecting to lift up a monument there, to his memory."⁷ Five years later beloved Bishop Meade visited Wakefield and found the freestone slab in fragments. By 1879 — one hundred years after the home had burned — the slab which Custis had placed over the birth site with such loving care had disappeared. It had remained there less than 70 years, a sad commentary on the vandalism of the American people.

In 1881 Congress authorized the construction of a monument to mark the birth site, but 15 years passed before the granite shaft was erected.

A group of patriotic women believed that more than a monument of granite should memorialize the site where the first President was born. They dreamed of an early eighteenth century plantation similar to the one owned by Washington's father. On February 22, 1923, under the able leadership of Mrs. Josephine Wheelwright Rust, they organized the Wakefield National Memorial Association. Their ultimate goal was

⁶ The Alexandria Gazette, Alexandria, Virginia, March 6, 1832 issue.

⁷ The Richmond Whig and Public Advertiser, Richmond, Virginia, October 14, 1851 issue.

to restore the Wakefield plantation and make it a shrine for all people. The date they set to complete this herculean task was 1932, the bicentennial of Washington's birth.

Shortly after the Wakefield National Memorial Association was incorporated in 1924, the organization raised funds for acquiring land which adjoined the Government property on the north, and induced Mr. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., to purchase 273 acres of the old Wakefield plantation and transfer it to the Federal Government. An Act of Congress granted the Association authority to erect a building on the birth site "as nearly as may be practicable, of the house in which George Washington was born . . ." In 1929 the Association acquired additional land, and two years later donated its holdings at Wakefield (approximately 100 acres) to the United States.

By Act of Congress, January 23, 1930, the 394.47 acres owned by the Federal Government was designated as George Washington Birthplace National Monument, a unit of the National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior.

In 1930-31 the Wakefield National Memorial Association, under authority from Congress, built the present house as a memorial structure to mark the birth site. As the most painstaking research failed to produce any reliable evidence concerning the appearance of the original Popes Creek home, the present structure is not a replica. It is, however, in keeping with the Virginia plantation scene at the time of Washington's association with the place.

The new memorial mansion was opened to the public in July, 1931. Since that time, the Wakefield National Memorial Association has been active in furnishing the house with suitable period pieces. Mrs. Rust, the president of the Association, died in 1931 just before the memorial mansion was completed. She was succeeded in the presidency by Mrs. Alice Rice Worthington, who, retiring in 1935, was in turn succeeded by Mrs. Francis B. Crowningshield, the present active and able president of the Association.

Last year over 80,000 people visited Wakefield and enjoyed its simple beauty. The serenity of the restored plantation with its cultivated fields and colonial garden, its fragrant boxwood and sweet-scented herbs, and the lovely water views afforded by Popes Creek and the Potomac River, are unforgettable impressions. The memorial mansion furnished with beautiful and appropriate items from a bygone day, the colonial kitchen with its huge fireplace and ancient cooking equipage, and the family burial ground on Bridges Creek -- almost 300 years old -- are integral parts of the scene. In addition to these glimpses of eighteenth century life are the well-kept grounds, the neat flower beds, and the grove of stately cedar trees. Such enchanting scenes which impress the senses and mind are taken for granted, as few visitors realize that not too many decades ago the birthplace of the First Citizen of Westmoreland County was all but forgotten. Without the tireless energy and vision of such people as Mrs. Josephine Wheelwright Rust and

her co-workers, and such organizations as the Wakefield National Memorial Association, there would be no Wakefield plantation today. To her and the members of the Association she organized, and to all others who gave time, energy, and money to make possible the historic shrine, the nation will forever owe a debt of gratitude.

APPENDIX I.

George Washington Parke Custis' account of his visit to
Popes Creek (Wakefield) in 1815:

"In June, 1815, I sailed on my vessel, the 'Lady of the Lake,' a fine topsail schooner of ninety tons, accompanied by two gentlemen, Messrs. Lewis and Grimes, bound to Popes Creek in the County of Westmoreland, carrying with us a slab of freestone, having the following inscription:

Here
The 11th of February, 1732 (Old Style)
George Washington
was Born.

"We anchored some distance from the land, and taking to our boats, we soon reached the mouth of Pope's or Bridge's Creek, and proceeding upwards we fell in with McKenzie Beverly, Esq., and several gentlemen composing a fishing party, and also with the overseer of the property that formed the object of our visit. We were kindly received by these individuals, and escorted to the spot, where a few scattered bricks alone marked the birthplace of the chief.

"...Desirous of making the ceremonial of depositing the stone as imposing as circumstances would permit, we enveloped it in the 'star spangled banner' of our country, and it was borne to its resting place in the arms of the descendants of four revolutionary patriots and soldiers...

"We gathered together the bricks of an ancient chimney that once formed the hearth around which Washington in his infancy had played, and constructed a rude kind of pedestal, on which we reverently placed the FIRST STONE, commending it to the respect and protection of the American people in general, and the citizens of Westmoreland County in particular.

"Bidding adieu to those who had received us so kindly, we re-embarked, and hoisted our colors, and being provided

with a piece of cannon and suitable ammunition, we fired a salute, awakening the echoes that had slept for ages around the hallowed spot...."

The above account is in a letter from G. W. P. Custis to the Editor, Alexandria Gazette, April 14, 1851, published in Recollections and Private Memoirs of Washington by G. W. P. Custis, Philadelphia, 1861, footnote p. 127.