

George Washington Birthplace

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

George Washington Birthplace
National Monument
Westmoreland County, Virginia



FROM TOBACCO PLANTATION TO NATIONAL SHRINE

Loss of the House and Abandonment of the Site

After the death of George Washington's father Augustine, in 1743, the Popes Creek plantation was inherited by George's half-brother, Augustine 2nd. Upon Augustine 2nd's death in 1762, the estate passed on to his son, William Augustine Washington, who renamed the plantation "Wakefield."

According to family tradition, "...Colo. W. Aug W. ...was living at the birthplace in 1779 that on Christmas Day he had a company of neighbors and he with others returning from a ride at midday was first to discover the roof in a blaze, that the contents of the house were for the most part saved, a severe frost prevailing at the time enabled him to haul the furniture with oxen across Popes Creek on the ice to be sheltered in a house...and that the supposition as to the origin of the fire was that a spark from the chimney had blown through the garret window to a pile of cotton in the seed stored in the garret."

The family moved into an overseer's house approximately one mile inland. When William Augustine moved to "Blenheim," it was a small frame structure, and Washington family tradition has it that the main brick part was built in 1781 using bricks salvaged from "Wakefield." In 1784, he completed the construction of a new home, "Haywood," on the Potomac River two miles west of the Popes Creek seat.

The home at Popes Creek was not rebuilt and the site was abandoned. The area became known as "Burnt House Point," and was referenced as such in official documents and maps as early as 1796.

The land passed down through subsequent generations of Washington descendants but the original birthplace location was never resettled.

Marking the Site



George Washington Parke Custis, the adopted grandson of George Washington, came to Popes Creek in June 1815 to commemorate the exact spot on which George Washington was born. Custis and his party were "...escorted to the spot, where a few scattered bricks alone marked the birthplace of the chief. ... 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 placed the FIRST STONE..."



By 1857, the Custis stone had been much broken and had disappeared by 1870. The area was farmed and the only indication of the location was the remains of an ancient chimney and a thicket of fig trees.

Public Acquisition and Monument



The family burial ground and sixty square feet of ground "on which the house stood in which George Washington was born" was donated in 1858 to the Commonwealth of Virginia for appropriate preservation and marking. Some additional lands were acquired; however, the Civil War ended Virginia's attempts at memorialization.

In 1879 and 1881 the United States Congress appropriated funds for "a monument to mark the birthplace." In 1882, Virginia presented to the United States the lands it held about the birthplace. Additional lands were acquired in 1883;

however, nothing happened until 1893 when Congress approved the construction of a 50 foot obelisk to mark the birthplace site and the construction of a wharf convenient to the site on the Potomac River.

Prior to the construction of the monument, the Army Corps of Engineers explored and mapped the foundations on the immediate site where the shaft was to be raised. The structure consisted of a brick foundation 38 feet long by 20 feet wide. The monument was erected in 1896 over this foundation that was believed to be the remains of the birth house.

The Wakefield National Memorial Association

In the early 1920's, a group of public spirited citizens banded together to seek a more meaningful memorialization of the old Washington home where the first president was born. The Wakefield National Memorial Association was organized June 11, 1923 "...to rebuild the home in which George Washington was born, to restore the neglected graveyard of his ancestors, and to make Wakefield a place of pilgrimage for all those who venerate the name of Washington."

The Association sought contributions from individuals, organizations and government. The Golden Book of Wakefield lists over 3,000 contributors, making gifts from \$5.00 to \$5,000. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. purchased 274 acres for \$115,000 that he would donate if the Association could match the amount from other sources. The Association raised \$99,656 from private contributors, \$50,000 from the United States Government, \$26,000 from the Commonwealth of Virginia and other states and over \$20,000 in interests and sales income. The total expenditures preparing the birthplace for conveyance to the National Park Service was in excess of \$185,000.



George Washington

The Association, today renamed the George Washington Birthplace National Memorial Association, continues to provide support to the Birthplace, including the operation of the Book Store and Gift Shop.

A Mansion Planned and Built

In 1926, Congress authorized the Association "to build, operate and maintain upon the plot of ground owned by the United States at Wakefield * * * a replica, as nearly as may be practicable, of the house in which George Washington was born, to be used and occupied in such manner and for such purposes in preserving the memory of George Washington as may be appropriate."

No authentic picture or plan of the original home is known. Several sketches exist from the 1850s, but these were determined to be renditions of a structure which may have been the Washington manse at Ferry Farm (adjacent to Fredericksburg) where George lived as a boy.

Family tradition described the home to have "...had five dormers, ten in all. Four large double outside chimneys, and the house was built of native brick...." A family descendent identified a reproduction of the home to be located near Providence Forge, Virginia. This home was similar to three homes existing in the area and to Gunston Hall, which is near Mount Vernon.

The placement of the Memorial House was justified by the apparent spot identified by G. W. P. Custis and the relative location of the fig thicket, of which reference was made by several visitors throughout the 19th century. "Near the right

hand portion of the thicket and several feet within it is found the spot where G. W. Parke Custis, in 1813 [actually 1815], placed the memorial stone at a point which he determined upon to be just inside the window of the room in which George Washington was born."

Examination of family inventories existing from 1762 and 1773 revealed a well furnished dwelling containing as least eight rooms and as many fireplaces.

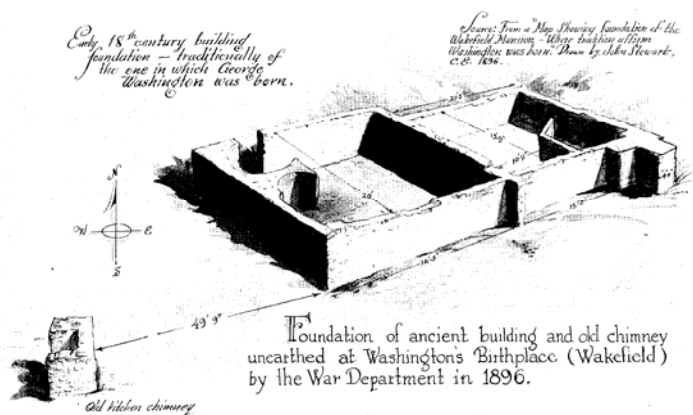
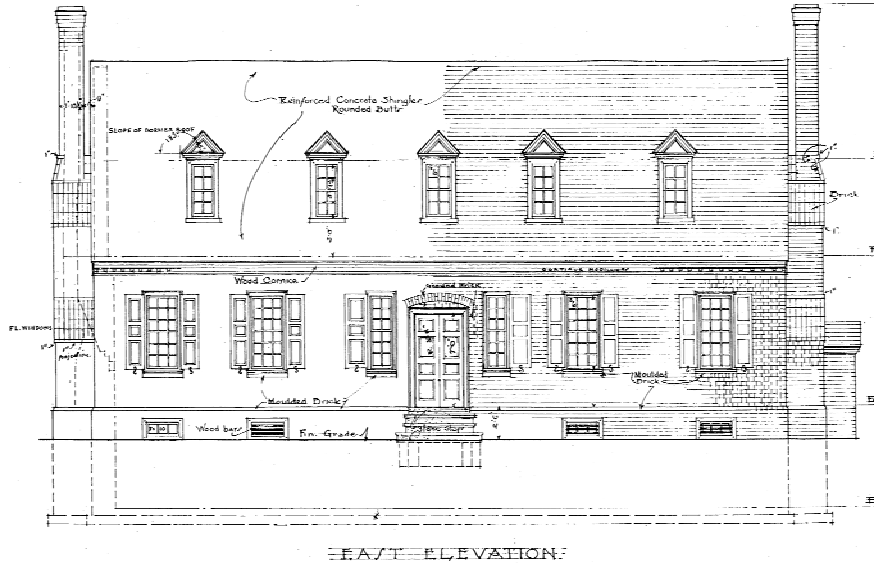
George Washington, in a 1792 letter responding to a genealogy question, refers to the home as "...the ancient mansion seat..." thus supporting

the assumption of a relatively large house.

The basic design of the home was developed by the Association and assigned to an architect familiar with the design of homes of the period, who would have to design a home which "...must be a house of ten or twelve rooms, of two stories in height, with an ell, and, probably not much dissimilar or smaller that Gunston Hall...."

The architect, Edward W. Donn, Jr. designed a home which was "...a typical house of a prosperous plantation gentleman of the period to which the original belonged, and follows the lines of the original foundations."

The foundation excavated at the spot indicated by Custis was too small to support the building envisioned and designed by the Association architects. It was suggested that the foundation was only a partial cellar, which was common for southern plantation homes of the period. That portion of the house without a cellar would not have had a brick foundation but would have been supported by timbers that would have disappeared over time.



The “Ancient Seat”



Archaeological exploration in 1930 revealed a large foundation 50 feet south of the ancient kitchen. This was fully excavated in 1936 and again in 1974. Analysis of the archaeological evidence has determined this structure to be the actual dwelling of the Washingtons at the time of George's birth.

The foundation over which the Memorial House was constructed has since been determined to be an outbuilding, perhaps a manufactory or distillery. Other structures identified on the site include the kitchen, a dairy; a small brick structure of unknown use; a pole structure, possibly for slave residence; and, in an adjacent field, a barn.

George Washington Birthplace National Monument

On June 22, 1931 the buildings and lands of the Association were turned over to the United States, the deed being signed by Josephine W. Rust, the Association president. On May 14, 1932, the completed buildings

and 367 acres once owned by the Washington family were formally presented to the Secretary of the Interior, and George Washington Birthplace National Monument officially became a National Park.

Josephine Wheelwright Rust



Mrs. Harry L. (Josephine Wheelwright) Rust was instrumental in founding the Wakefield National Memorial Association. Mrs. Rust became its first president. A descendent of both Colonels Nathaniel Pope and John Washington, she was a forceful, capable leader and continued as president until her death in June

1931. Her role "as the active, stimulating force in arousing effective government and private aid" was clearly evident throughout the project. Four days after signing the deed, on June 26, 1931, her labor finished, her hopes realized, her patriotic duty done, Mrs. Rust died. Her over-taxed heart failed.