



Archeology Program

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In the Beginning: Archeology of George Washington's Birthplace

Modern historical archeology, albeit in its most rudimentary form, had its earliest beginnings at [George Washington Birthplace National Monument](#) 130 years ago and has continued, growing in scholarship and method through the 20th and 21st centuries. Much of this archeology, under the stewardship of the National Park Service, has made significant contributions to both the prehistoric and historical archeology of the Chesapeake region.

George Washington's great-grandfather John Washington immigrated to America from England in 1656 or 1657 at the age of 24. He settled on land on Mattox Creek in present-day Virginia given to him by his father-in-law. In 1664, John Washington purchased 100 acres of land on the east side of Bridge's Creek, near the confluence with the Potomac River (today part of George Washington Birthplace National Monument). At the time of his death he owned several thousand acres of land in tidewater Virginia, including the site of Mount Vernon (Hatch 1979).

In 1717 or 1718, John's grandson Augustine Washington purchased 150 acres of land on Popes Creek, near the confluence with the Potomac. On this property Augustine built the house where the first President was born. The large house was built partially or entirely of brick. Here George Washington was born in 1732. Three years later Augustine moved the family to Mount Vernon. After Augustine's death the property on Popes Creek passed to George's older half-brother, Augustine (Hatch 1979).

The Popes Creek property passed to Augustine's son William Augustine Washington after the deaths of his parents, Augustine in 1762 and Ann in 1774. He did not have long to enjoy the house, however, (which he had named "Wakefield") because it reportedly burned on Christmas Day, 1779. Wakefield was never rebuilt and the family moved to nearby Blenheim (Hatch 1979).

Some years later, in 1815 or 1816, George's adopted grandson George Washington Parke Custis laid a memorial stone at the site of the ruins (Bruggeman 2008 Chapter 1 note 3). By doing so, Custis made this the first commemoration of a birthplace in America. Shortly after the sacking of Washington, D.C. in August 1814 by the British, Custis and several friends sailed down the Potomac with a large stone upon which was carved:

HERE ON THE 11th OF FEBRUARY, 1732, GEORGE WASHINGTON WAS BORN
(Hatch 1979).

Hauling the tribute stone from the river bank, Custis and his helpers placed it at the spot he remembered as being the site of the Washington family home. Over the ensuing years the stone was apparently moved several times, broken, and eventually lost, along with Custis' memory of "the spot" (Powell 1968; Hatch 1979). Several accounts and letters published in Richmond and Arlington newspapers during early 19th century clearly describe the ruins of the birthplace house as a 60-foot long structure with a filled cellar flanked by the remnants of two large chimney bases.

In 1858, the Commonwealth of Virginia acquired the house site and a cemetery, but the Civil War prevented any preservation efforts. The state donated the land to the Federal government in 1882. Unfortunately, both the site and the accounts became obscured by the effects of the Civil War, farming, and inevitable changes in the landscape.

Archeological Research

Between 1882 and 1941 over a dozen archeological projects were carried out at Washington's birthplace. The first known excavation at Wakefield took place in 1882. In that year, F. O. St. Clair and Charles C. Perkins, both at the U.S. State Department, undertook an excavation at the so-called "traditional" birthplace site (Powell 1968). By 1882, the traditional site of the house was a lovely spot overlooking Pope's Creek where it was generally accepted that Custis



Costumed celebrants and Memorial House at dedication of George Washington Birthplace NM.

had laid the stone some 66 years earlier.

Archeology carried out by F. O. St. Clair in the 1880s and John Stewart in 1896 resulted in a "new" traditional birthplace, a 38.5' building (probably a brewery) located about 60 feet from the spot likely marked by Custis in 1816. To commemorate (once again) "the spot," the U.S. government marked it with a granite obelisk in 1896.

The Wakefield National Memorial Association was formed in 1923 to restore the property. In 1930, the grounds were authorized as a National Monument. The Memorial Association won the right to build a "replica" of the birthplace mansion on the same spot. Government engineer O.G. Taylor re-excavated the area where the granite obelisk had been and the new Memorial House was to be built. In addition to uncovering the brewery again, Taylor fed and financed his own curiosity, extending his excavation towards the southeast, locating a "...U-shaped building of considerable size" (in Powell 1968:29).



Archeologist working on excavation of "Building X".

Taylor had re-discovered the birth house described in the early accounts, but not in time to keep the brewery from being destroyed and a carbon copy of the president of the Memorial Association's childhood home, Twiford, from being built as a replica of the "birthplace." NPS Landscape Architect Charles Peterson described the destruction of the 18th-century brewery foundation as "... a great archaeological crime" in a letter to the director of the Wakefield Project in November of 1930 (Peterson 1930). The foundations of the U-shaped 18th-century Washington family home were referred to rather noncommittally as "Building X."

During the 1930s and until the Second World War, the NPS continued its archeology program aided by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). In 1932, two burials were discovered while doing utility work at the "Lodge" (a dining and lodging facility across Dancing Swamp from the Memorial House), one of which was thought to be that of an African American woman (Powell 1968). In 1935, two outbuildings near the Memorial House were uncovered, and from 1936 to 1941 the CCC completely excavated Building X, and also trenched several nearby areas locating a smokehouse, icehouse, and a barn.

The war made the CCC redundant and all archeology stopped, not to resume until 1974 when the NPS contracted with Norman F. Barka of the College of William and Mary. Barka was the first professionally trained archeologist to dig at Wakefield. His team explored six areas in the park, including the formal garden adjacent to Building X, where they located an earthfast building with a root cellar (Barka 1978). Nearly twenty years later the structure was interpreted by Dennis Pogue and Esther White (1992) as a slave quarter, the first at George Washington Birthplace NM. The Barka team also explored the site for the new visitor center, recording a number of prehistoric features, and excavated a post-set barn with "stepped" post holes common in Northern Neck earthfast construction during the 18th century (W. Graham, pers. comm. 2001).

Close on the heels of Barka, Brook Blades and John Cotter explored portions of other sites on the Wakefield property in 1977. Cotter and Blades located a cellared 20' by 19' circa 1651 dwelling, the Brooks house, as well as a 13' by 14' outbuilding. At the site of George Washington's great grandfather's house, they uncovered three structures: the 40' by 20' earthfast main house with a brick chimney on the east side, a 21' by 15' outbuilding previously discovered in 1930, and a new 19' by 12' brick foundation defining an unidentified outbuilding (Blades 1979). During the 1980s, Blades and NPS archeologist Douglas Campana tested a shell midden along the Potomac; Linda and Greg Waselkov recorded yet another. NPS archeologist David Orr documented 44WM218, an early slave quarter later explored by College of William and Mary staff and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

The first comprehensive park-wide systematic site identification survey was conducted in 1997 as a joint effort between the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and the College of William and Mary. The survey team identified 41 sites within the 550-acre park. In addition to documenting a "comprehensive set of prehistoric components in a variety of micro-environmental settings," ranging from the late Archaic through the late Woodland periods (Jones et al. 1999:ii), six additional historic sites were recorded.

In 1999, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation carried out site evaluation surveys on four of the historic sites: 44WM218, 259, 272, and 89. Each of the sites contained both 17th and 18th-century components. Three of the sites, 218, 259, and 89 were thought to be associated with enslaved Africans linked to the Washington family; the fourth was likely the home of Original Brown, a settler whose name appears on the 1683 Chamberlain Survey (Gilmore et al. 2000). Two significant essays were included as part of that report: Historian Paul Moyer's "Rise and Fall of Tobacco Culture at George Washington Birthplace National Monument,

Virginia" and Anna Agbe-Davies' "Contribution of African Americans to the Development of the Northern Neck, Virginia."

An additional survey of threatened sites was conducted, again by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, in 2001. The Park contracted with the foundation to recover archeological and environmental data from prehistoric resources along the Potomac River that were being threatened by erosion and to test an area of 44WM89 (the house site) where an orchard was planned. The prehistoric shell middens in jeopardy were formed during the Middle and Late Woodland Periods. The orchard site proved to be multi-component, containing prehistoric shell middens as well as 17th through 20th historic components (Harwood 2002).

The most recent archeological work, except for utility monitoring using NPS resource personnel, was the 2008 assessment of 44WM089, the Memorial House, and Building X area on Burnt House Point carried out by the William and Mary Center for Archeological Research (Monroe and Lewes 2008). The survey and assessment addressed the previous excavations in that area, but did not do any actual digging.

Historical Assessments

The "re-history" of the Birthplace in the early 20th century was a virtual maelstrom in a teacup of power struggles between the Wakefield National Memorial Association and the National Park Service, complete with questionable archeology and stubbornness on both sides. This, of course, makes an intriguing story and has fostered scholarship such as Seth Bruggeman's (2008) and that of NPS archeologist Joy Beasley (2001).



Oyster shell footprint of Washington's actual birth home with Memorial House in background.

Bruggeman (2008) in his captivating volume, *Here, George Washington was Born*, explores the administrative and public history of our country's first "birthplace" shrine and compares the 19th and early 20th-century veneration of George Washington with that of saints in the medieval Western world. For reasons both patriotic and self-promoting, indexical, iconic, and symbolic classes of Washingtonian relics have been used (and abused) to tell the story of our most famous founding father's early history. In the first 30 years of the 20th century, Bruggeman points out, indexical relics that relate directly to Washington, such as artifacts and building foundations, were ignored in favor of the symbolic relics that had no direct relationship to the President. These include the Wakefield Foundation Memorial House and its furnishings (Bruggeman 2008).

Beasley chronicles this battle of memory, memorialization, and archeology in her 2001 article "The Birthplace of a Chief: Archeology and Meaning at George Washington Birthplace National Monument." The most recent scholarship has been the comprehensive 2009 Ethnographic Overview and Assessment produced for the National Park Service by Kathleen Bragdon, and colleagues (2009). The authors identify and make recommendations regarding the park's culturally significant resources, particularly the extensive Native American and African American assets.

Conclusion

In some ways the archeology of George Washington Birthplace NM has paralleled that of Historic Jamestowne, with early non-professional work being carried out in the 19th century at both places, one because it was thought of as the birthplace of an idea and the other because it was the birthplace of the man thought to actualize that idea. Both became national parks in the 1930s and both had much of their Depression-era archeology carried out by the CCC. George Washington Birthplace NM has never achieved the fame of Historic Jamestowne, but its contributions to scholarship and archeology have been innovative and noteworthy.

Up until 1974, the archeological agenda at Washington's birthplace was, by nature, particularistic: to find the remains of buildings associated with our Founding Father, particularly his birth site, and preserve and interpret those to the visiting public. A similar approach was taken by Colonial Williamsburg until the advent of Ivor Noël Hume in the late 1950s. Archeology at George Washington Birthplace NM in the last three or four decades, however, has concentrated on learning about all of the people who have inhabited that landscape over the past several thousand years rather than focusing on one individual who only spent a very short time there.

Excavation of the historical sites in the park added to our inventory and understanding of earthfast housing. The vast majority of dwelling in early Virginia and Maryland were constructed solely of wood, a tradition that was poorly understood until recently. The excavations by Barka in 1974 and by Cotter and Blades at the John Washington and Henry Brooks sites in 1977 added significantly to the inventory of impermanent architecture. Later

survey work by William and Mary and Colonial Williamsburg identified and evaluated houses attributed to enslaved people in several areas of the park. Their importance lies in their potential for providing detailed information on Washington family slaves and their treatment of enslaved people.

Shell middens and Woodland Period sites have been identified that appear to contain evidence of a trend towards reduced mobility characterized by Late Woodland sites in the surrounding area, i.e. occupation over the winter months rather than just the warmer seasons. Additionally, a number of surveyed Native American sites at George Washington Birthplace NM contained Potomac Creek pottery, a type associated with groups immigrating into the area from what is now New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania in the Late Woodland Period just before contact with the invading English settlers, like John Washington. That such a potential exists for identifying new types of Native American sites in fields that have undergone plowing for 350 years suggests that similar, more intact sites may exist in areas of the national monument that have not been so disturbed.

What of the future of archeology at George Washington Birthplace NM? Intensive survey, evaluation of resources, and historical reflection and perspective over the past 20 years has helped the NPS to manage these resources and develop a coherent picture of the prehistoric and historical development of habitation at Washington's birthplace, the Northern Neck, and the Chesapeake in general. It still remains a goal for the NPS to explore the potential of these Native American, African American and English American sites, and to uncover and expose their richness as a source for understanding the process of becoming modern Americans.

Notes

The National Park Service's *Mission 66* initiative prompted NPS archeologist Bruce Powell in 1968 to write a comprehensive overall assessment of the previous work and historian Charles Hatch (1969, 1979) to publish *Pope's Creek Plantation: Birthplace of George Washington* a year later. The most current overviews include a two-volume cultural landscape assessment produced by Oculus and John Milner Associates in 1999 (Oculus 1999) and a detailed assessment of the Memorial Mansion area (44WM089) by the William and Mary Center for Archaeological Research in 2008 (Moore and Lewes 2008). I have shamelessly borrowed from all of these wonderful sources.

*By Andrew Edwards, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation,
Society for Historical Archeology—2012—Baltimore*

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Last updated: 08/11/2020 23:50:05

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