

George Washington Birthplace



National Monument, Virginia

Popes Creek Plantation is a living piece of Americana. It is the birthplace and early boyhood home of George Washington—and the substantial re-creation of the farm and its buildings gives visitors today an opportunity to experience a way of life now vanished. Wakefield, as the plantation is now called, was a typical colonial Tidewater farm. It was into such an environment that George Washington was born and spent the first years of his life. Furnishings of the house and kitchen, gardens of flowers and herbs, the crops in the fields, and the livestock are of types which help recall Washington's childhood days. From his boyhood visits Washington could recall vegetables growing in the garden, flowers blooming near the house, fruit ripening on the trees, and fields of corn, wheat, and tobacco. Tilling the land, felling timber, fishing in the quiet waters, hunting game in marshes and woodlands, and exploring the fields and hedges were experiences he later remembered from his days at Popes Creek.

A Farm in Colonial Virginia

“No pursuit is more congenial with my nature and gratifications, than that of agriculture; nor none I so pant after as again to become a tiller of the Earth.”

George Washington, 1795

To the early settlers of Tidewater Virginia, rivers were important. The great waters of the region—the James, the York, the Rappahannock, the Potomac, and Chesapeake Bay flowing from the west and north, gaining strength and volume from the numerous tributaries—were the highways of colonial communications. On the south bank of the Potomac, 50 miles from its junction with the Chesapeake, Popes Creek makes its contribution to the river. It was here in the Northern Neck of Virginia in 1732 that George Washington was born.

Washington was born into a family and a class that, from the time of its arrival in Virginia in the mid-17th century, had taken an active part in the life of the colony. They were members of the planter aristocracy, a position which carried an obligation to participate in the military and civil affairs of the colony. The Washington plantation, though not large, furnished a livelihood sufficient to enable the Washingtons to follow a tradition of public service.

Popes Creek Plantation was typical of the numerous farms in the Tidewater region. The master's house, its size and furnishings largely dependent upon the wealth of the planter, was the center of farm life. The planter lived here with his family, waited upon by servants, who were generally black slaves but sometimes were indentured servants from England. The front of the house opened onto a vista of green

lawns and gardens sweeping down to Popes Creek and the plantation wharf. Near the planter's house were the out-buildings: the kitchen, placed away from the main house because of the fire hazard; a dairy and smokehouse for preserving perishable foods; and the slave quarters. Beyond this cluster of buildings stretched fields of corn, wheat, and hay, timberlands, farm buildings, and fields of tobacco—the all important cash crop of Tidewater Virginia.

Slaves worked the fields and tended the crops that provided the necessities of life: grains, dairy products, and meat. Slaves also furnished many skills: carpentry, blacksmithing, coopering, spinning and weaving. It was the work of Africans which made the plantation largely self-sufficient.

Luxury items like sugar, fine cloth, dinnerware, and wines, which could not be produced on the plantation, were received in exchange for tobacco. When the “noxious weed” had been harvested and cured, it was loaded on board a merchant ship from England moored at the planter's wharf. These vessels brought goods ordered by the planter a year earlier from his agent in London.

The labor and physical skills of slaves sustained the plantation, but the planter was by no means left with a life of ease. It was his organizational and business skills that, excepting the vicissitudes of weather and market, determined the success of the farm. The planter's day was full: up at dawn, perhaps to read in a Greek or Latin classic before breakfast; long hours in the field overseeing the spring planting, the curing of tobacco, or preparing orders for his commercial agent in England; then a large dinner and entertainment with the family and guests who might have made the difficult journey to Popes Creek.

But men like the Washingtons had more than plantation work to keep them occupied. They

tried to imitate the life of the English country gentry on the frontier of America. The attitudes and ideals of this class, transported from England to Virginia, incorporated an obligation to serve society. Public office and military duty were performed without complaint, although they often entailed sacrifice of the individual's comfort and welfare. Days spent traveling to Jamestown, and after 1699 Williamsburg, and often weeks sitting in the House of Burgesses discussing the affairs of the colony meant much time away from the plantation, during which he could not oversee his own interests.

When the master was absent, his wife assumed the burdens of managing the farm. This was in addition to her regular tasks of running the household, supervising the house servants, keeping accounts, and planning meals. She also cared for the children, which might number 10 or 12—and the arrival of a new one was almost an annual event.

There was little formal education on the plantation and this generally limited to boys. Girls were taught the rudiments of reading, writing, and needlepoint. Wealthier planters might hire



a schoolteacher, often the local minister, to teach mathematics, surveying, and law as well as the “polite” arts of language, philosophy, and dancing. The sons of wealthier planters were often sent “home” to England for higher education or to study at the Inns of Court, the famous law schools of London.

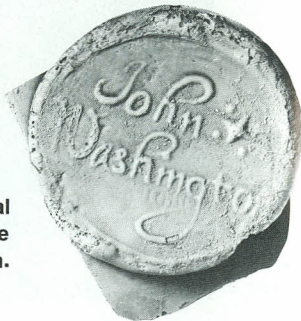
George Washington son to Augustine & Mary his Wife was born
of 11. Day of February 1732^{1/2} about 10 in the Morning & was baptizd the 6. of Aprill
following by Mr. Beverley Whiting & Cap: Christopher Brooke godfather: and
Mr. Mildred Gregory godmother.



Washington's birth was carefully noted in the family Bible. The aspirations of his family—and other planters—to emulate the English gentry are suggested by the use of the crest granted one of Washington's English ancestors.



A wine bottle seal
found on the
Washington plantation.



The riverways aided social intercourse as well as commerce. Farms were miles apart, and roads few and nearly impassable most of the year. The difficulty of travel made visitors welcome on the plantation. Ship captains, travelers, friends, and relatives were a source of news and information from the world outside the isolated community of the farm. Royal birthdays, weddings, and funerals afforded the planters opportunities for gatherings of relatives and friends. Fond of music and dancing, Virginians jigged and reeled until the small hours, and rose early for another day of work. Planters also enjoyed gambling and such sports as hunting, fishing, horse racing, cock fighting, and bowling.

Although there was time left for pleasures and education, the central feature of the colonial plantation was work, hard work. On most plantations life was simple and the burdens many. Planters watched the price of tobacco steadily decline; their wives saw one out of two of their children die before the age of three. By and large, the planters and their families who lived and worked on the plantation were God-fearing, dedicated people. It was an honorable life and, with judicious management, satisfying and profitable.



The Washington Family

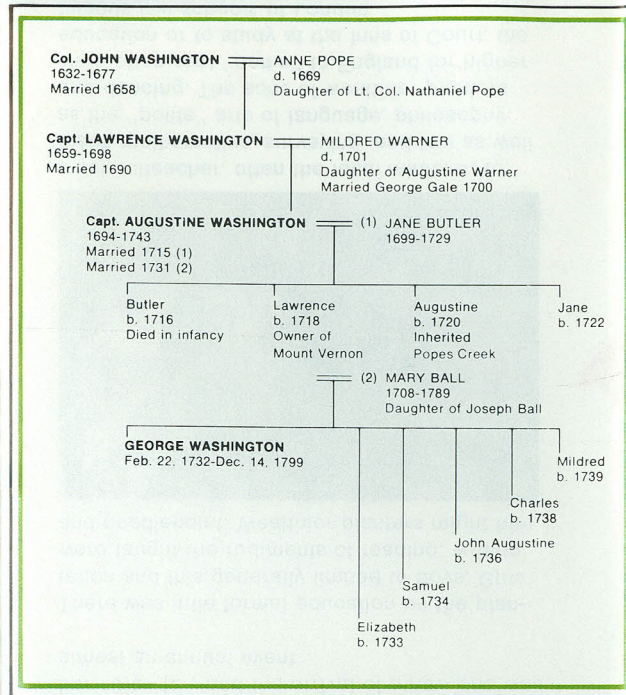
“The welfare of the country is the great object to which our cares and efforts ought to be directed.”

George Washington

It was the winter of 1656-57 when John Washington, the great grandfather of George Washington, first came to this land of rivers and farms. He was mate on the merchant ketch *Sea Horse* of London, taking on tobacco near Mattox Creek. After the ketch weighed anchor and set sail for another plantation, it ran aground and sank. In the ensuing weeks, as the ketch was refloated, John Washington became attached to the family of Col. Nathaniel Pope, a planter at Mattox Creek. John remained in Virginia when his vessel departed, and in 1658 he married Anne, the daughter of Colonel Pope. As a wedding present, the couple received from her father a 700-acre estate at Mattox Creek. In 1664 Washington bought land on Bridges Creek, 4 miles east of Mattox Creek, where he established his home.

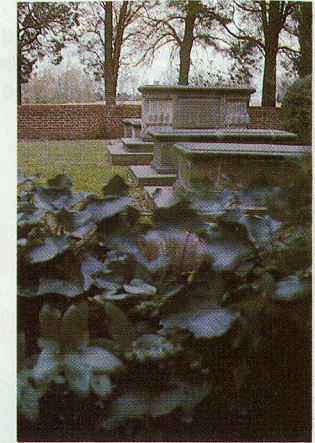
John led a prosperous life at Bridges Creek and took an active interest in public affairs. He served in numerous civil offices, including the Virginia House of Burgesses, led a military expedition against the Indians, and rose to such prominence that the name of the local Anglican parish was changed to Washington in his honor. His son, Lawrence also prospered, and served in several local civil and military offices, including membership in the House of Burgesses.

Lawrence's son Augustine continued this tradition of public service as he expanded the estate. In 1718 he purchased 150 acres from the Abbingdon family on Popes Creek, about a mile



east of his Bridges Creek home. The land between Popes and Bridges Creeks became the home where he spent the greater part of his adult life. Augustine was a tall and powerful yet gentle man. Although he tried his hand at mining iron, he was primarily a planter.

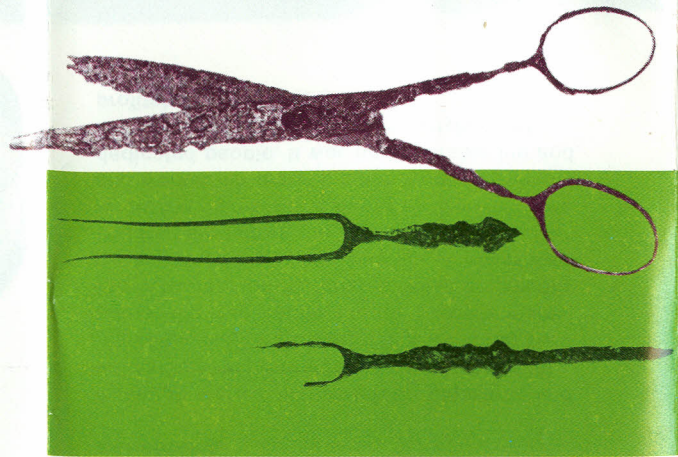
At Popes Creek between 1722 and 1726 Augustine built the house in which George Washington was born. Augustine's first wife, Jane



The family Burying Ground contains the graves and memorials of many of Washington's ancestors and family.



Butler, died in 1729, and was survived by three children: Lawrence, Augustine, Jr., and Jane; their first son, Butler, dying in infancy. His second wife was Mary Ball, the daughter of Col. Joseph Ball of Epping Forest. Their first child, George, was born on February 22, 1732. Five other children were born to Augustine and Mary: Elizabeth, Samuel, Charles, John Augustine, and Mildred, who also died as an infant.



Artifacts found on the farm represent implements that may have been used in the Kitchen House. Produce, herbs—drying above the fire—and swine helped fill and vary the plantation's food needs.

Young George Washington spent the first 3½ years of his life at the Popes Creek Plantation. In 1735 his father moved the family to his Little Hunting Creek Plantation, later known as Mount Vernon. After 4 years, Augustine's business interest led him to move the family to Ferry Farm on the Rappahannock River near Fredericksburg. George was 11 when his father died.

George's half-brother, Augustine, Jr., inherited the Popes Creek Plantation, and from time to time during his youth young George lived there. The half-brothers became very close during the extended periods they were together.

On Christmas Day 1779 when General Washington was leading the Continental Army in the fight for American independence from England, his birthplace home accidentally burned. William Augustine Washington, George's nephew, who was then master of the plantation, moved his family to another home several miles away and the house was never rebuilt.

Uncovering The Past

Archeological searches for physical remains at George Washington's birthplace site have gone on since the latter part of the 19th century. Five structures have been located so far: the birth house, the smokehouse-dairy, the kitchen, and two unidentified structures. Artifacts from these excavations consist of 18th-century ceramics, jewelry and ornaments, glass vessels, smoking pipes, and hardware. These investigations have helped historians and archeologists reconstruct the working plantation which you see here today.

The Monument

In 1858 the Commonwealth of Virginia acquired the home-site and the burying ground to mark and protect them, but the Civil War ended those plans. In 1882 Virginia donated the land to the Federal Government. Fourteen years later, a granite shaft was erected to the memory of George Washington.

In 1923 the Wakefield National Memorial Association was formed to recover and restore the birthplace grounds. Aided by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the Association by 1931 was able to transfer to the government enough land to bring the holding to 394 acres. During 1930-31 the memorial house and the kitchen were built and furnished and the colonial garden was established. Then, in 1932, the 200th anniversary of Washington's birth, the park was officially opened, and title was transferred to the Federal Government.

A Reminder

To help us preserve this historic area please observe the following regulations:

- Plant and animal life, ground cover, buildings, and historical artifacts above and below ground are protected by Federal law and must be left undisturbed.

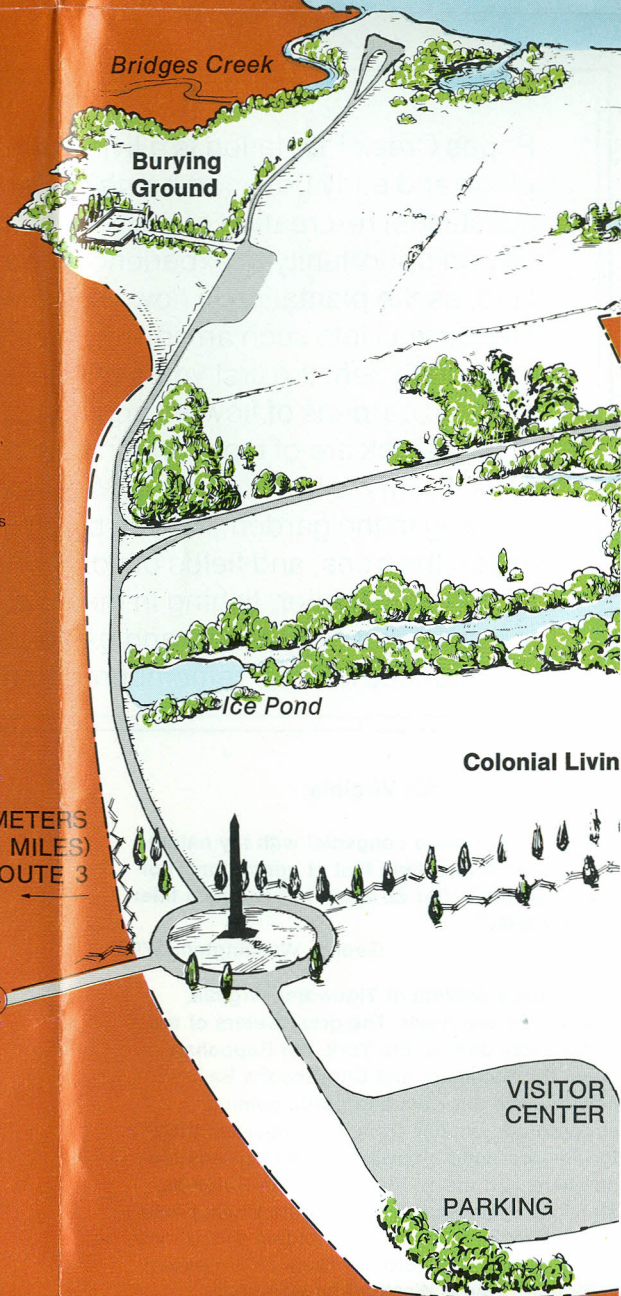
Colonial Living Farm

Though most of the acreage was devoted to tobacco, corn, and wheat, the plantation also had to produce all the basic necessities required by the small community: vegetables, meat and hides, grain, and timber. A kitchen garden supplied cabbage, cauliflower, parsnips, turnips, carrots, potatoes, yams, and other vegetables. The present farm, established in 1968, re-creates some of the scenes of Washington's youth. The livestock, poultry, and crops are of old varieties and breeds, and are raised by farming methods that were common during colonial times.

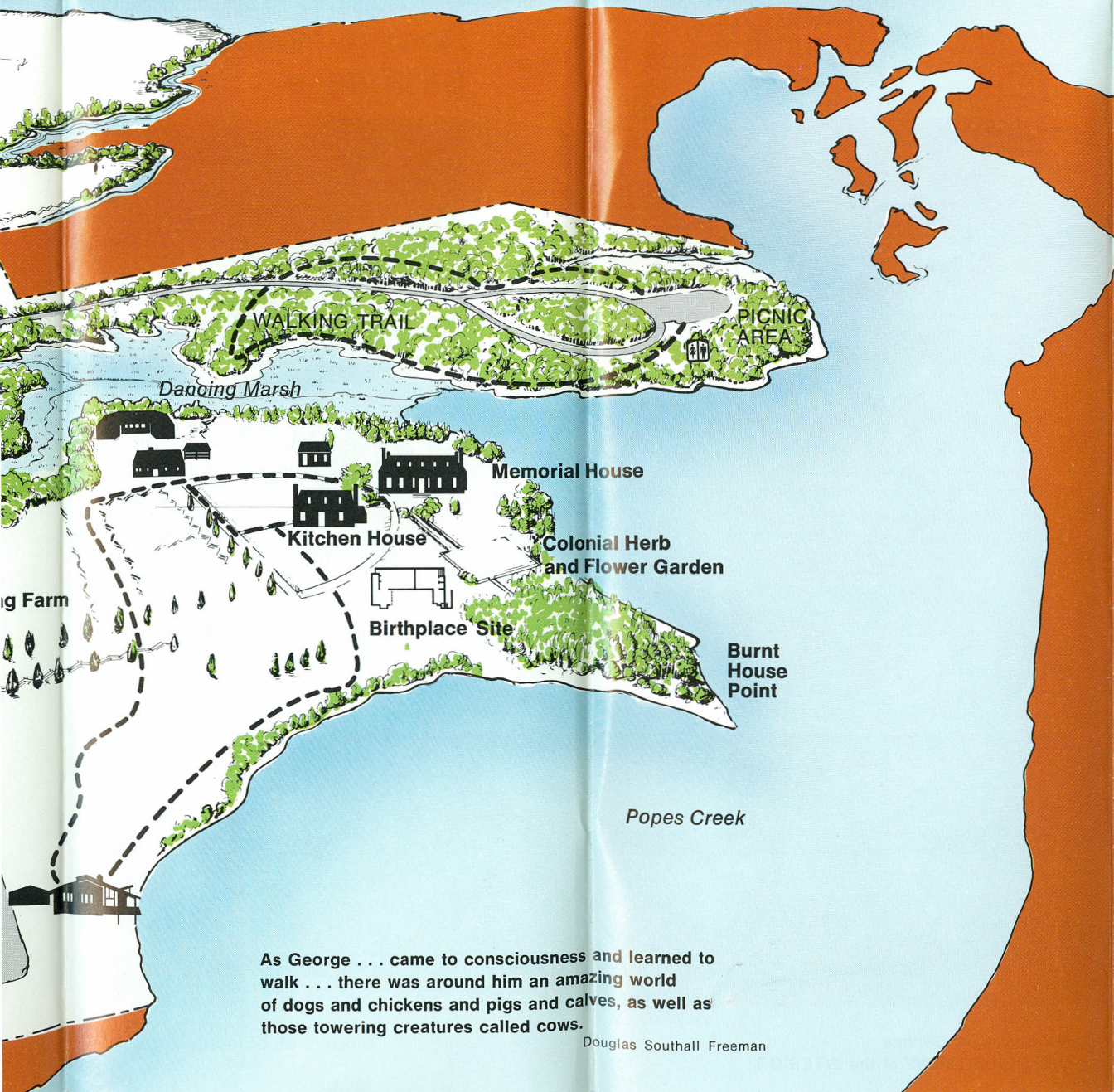
- Firearms are prohibited.
 - Pets must be physically controlled at all times.
- For your safety:
- Do not feed or tease the animals or enter the pastures or pens.
 - Poisonous plants are common in the area. Please watch where you step.

2.7 KILOMETERS
(1.7 MILES)
TO ROUTE 3

204



Potomac River



As George . . . came to consciousness and learned to walk . . . there was around him an amazing world of dogs and chickens and pigs and calves, as well as those towering creatures called cows.

Douglas Southall Freeman

Birthplace Site

Oyster shells outline the plantation's main house, which was the building in which George Washington was born. It was a large, U-shaped building of at least nine rooms. These foundations have been covered over to preserve them.

Colonial Herb And Flower Garden

The herbs and flowers growing here are ones that an 18th-century family might have had. The herbs were used for cooking, medicines, and scents.

Popes Creek

A walk through the cedar grove on Burnt House Point affords excellent views of Popes Creek and the waterfowl of the area. The creek runs into the Potomac River, which linked this farm to the outside world. Small boys eagerly awaited every ship. The activity at the wharf—loading hogsheads of tobacco, receiving goods and news from England, listening to the yarns of sailors—was a high point for everyone on the plantation.

Kitchen House

The kitchen of the Popes Creek Plantation was housed in a separate building, a common practice to avoid fire. This structure, which occupies the site of the original kitchen, has been furnished as a typical 18th-century kitchen.

Memorial House

Constructed as a memorial to George Washington, this building represents a typical home of the upper classes of the period. It has four rooms and a central hallway on each floor. The bricks were handmade from the clay of a nearby field. A small tea table is believed to have been in the original house, and most of the other furnishings are more than 200 years old. The house and furnishings illustrate the setting into which George Washington was born and the manner of life that his father led as a moderately wealthy planter in 18th-century Tidewater Virginia.

Burying Ground

When John Washington, George's great-grandfather, settled in the Bridges Creek area, he established a family burying ground near his house. Through the years, many of the Washingtons who lived at that home, and at the home overlooking Popes Creek, were buried here. Thirty-two burials have been found at this location, including those of George's half-brother, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. Two of the original gravestones remain; 5 memorial tablets, which were placed here in the 1930s honor the American ancestors of our first President.



Visiting The Park

George Washington Birthplace is on the Potomac River, 61 kilometers (38 miles) east of Fredericksburg, Va., and is accessible over Va. 3 and Va. 204. The park is open every day except December 25 and January 1.

Park facilities include the historic mansion area, colonial farm, burying ground, hiking trails, and picnic area. Swimming and camping facilities are not provided.

Administration

George Washington Birthplace National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Washington's Birthplace, VA 22575, is in immediate charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.