

# George Washington Birthplace

George Washington Birthplace  
National Monument  
Virginia

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Washington has proven the most elusive of national heroes. The scope of his achievements and the strength of his character led a grateful nation to elevate him to the level of myth. As his life was magnified with legend and held up as example to countless schoolchildren, Washington the man began to disappear behind the model. His own shunning of kingly trappings made him even more revered and contributed to his glorification in the 19th century. Today his name and image are pervasive symbols. "The Father of his Country" is, like the monument built to him, an emblem of the nation. But for many the historical person has become as abstract as the monument, as unreal as the marble statues. If time and custom have obscured Washington, then we need to strip away the traditions of two centuries to see him again.

While we have little information about Washington's early years, we can begin to know the man by understanding the society in which he reached maturity, by searching for his roots in a time and place. When Washington was born on February 22, 1732, in a middle-sized plantation manor house along the banks of Popes Creek, Virginia was the largest and becoming one of the most powerful colonies. Its distinctive Tidewater culture flourished in the years before the French and Indian War. It was a society in which Washington's father, grandfather, and great-grandfather before him were solidly entrenched, and he rapidly absorbed its ideals and values, becoming their most famous representative. From this culture he took the traits which defined his character: his sense of public duty and his love of farming.

Washington always professed to be first and foremost a farmer, taking on public duties only as long as his country needed his services. Living at Popes Creek until he was almost four, and later as an adolescent spending long periods there, he watched his father's slaves working the farm and helped his brother run it. He lived close to the natural world, his character developing to the slow rhythms of farm life, and his deep attachment to the land stayed with him to the end. We can understand these critical early influences only by taking an active role, by engaging ourselves with the past at Popes Creek. As the august symbol we know as Washington was created in the imaginations of an earlier America, we must use our own to move closer to the man.

Washington had been a civilian for 13 years when he donned his old Virginia militia uniform for a portrait by Charles Willson Peale in 1772. It is the earliest depiction of Washington.  
Washington and Lee University



## The Tidewater Culture

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

By the time George Washington's older brother Lawrence had married into the neighboring Fairfax family, the Washingtons, though not on a level with the aristocratic Fairfaxes or Carters, were well established in the landed gentry of Tidewater Virginia. It was a culture shaped by abundant land and the proximity of water. The Potomac, Rappahannock, York, and James Rivers, running in parallel courses through eastern Virginia to the Chesapeake Bay, bore colonial merchant traffic as far inland as the rocky fall line. The flat, rich peninsulas between the tidal rivers were covered with forests broken by large fields of wheat, corn, and above all, tobacco.

This somewhat isolated agricultural colony had taken a different turn from its northern neighbors.



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A traveler would first have been struck by the gangs of black slaves working the fields. The visitor would also have noted the often imposing houses of the slaves' masters and the almost

complete lack of urban life. Because the planters made what they needed or imported it from England, few supporting towns had taken root. Colonial Virginia in Washington's father's time was a rural society not far removed from the frontier stage, and many of the planters were still roughhewn. While the great proprietors were beginning to model themselves on the English "squirearchy," for most this was more aspiration than reality. William Byrd's collection of classical works was famous, but practical books on law and agriculture were far more common in the libraries of most planters.

If not as genteel as their English models, the Tidewater planters did share their tradition of hospitality. So sporadic was information from outside that the news-bearing traveler would have been welcome in any house. County court days, military muster, and Sundays in the churchyard were also important seeds of community—rituals of deference and "condescension" (then a positive word) that reaffirmed authority and rank. But family plantations were the focus of Tidewater life. The planter was at the apex of his plantation community, of which the slaves formed the base. This patriarchal establishment was reflected in the architecture. The estate house was surrounded, often with classical symmetry, by outbuildings, formal gardens, fields, and slave quarters. While this type of plantation was greatly outnumbered by smaller tobacco farms with few or no slaves, the larger planters dominated the colony, controlling land and credit and holding offices of authority. As the gap between rich and poor grew during Washington's time, the larger planters formed a ruling class with a distinct ideology and culture. This class perpetuated itself through intermarriage and inheritance, and most planters felt an obligation to accumulate enough land to leave an estate to each of their sons. To prepare the boys for their inheritance, the planter had them schooled in basic surveying, law, and mathematics. The sons of the wealthiest received further education at William and Mary College in Williamsburg or back "home" in England.

As important as land and education were the classical ideals that the planters passed on to their children: honor, dignity, and especially public service. Vestryman in the powerful Anglican church, county justice, sheriff, officer in the militia—these were positions of authority that confirmed a planter's status. Winning a seat in



Stratford Hall Library

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the House of Burgesses, as did Washington's grandfather and great-grandfather, demonstrated a wider influence, while only the most powerful were appointed to the Governor's Council. Demonstrations of merit before the community were important in this competitive society. A man of honor was expected to perform under the constant glare of public scrutiny. He was judged for his ability to speak in court, drill troops, show generosity to his inferiors, display elegant clothes and carriage at church, control a horse, or handle himself in an impromptu wrestling match outside the courthouse. The love of glory and aggressive pursuit of fame were promoted as virtues, indicative of character and benefiting both individual and society. It was these values that Washington early embraced, then came to personify—planter by nature, public servant when called.

"The welfare of the country is the great object to which our cares and efforts ought to be directed."  
George Washington

## The Ascent of the Washingtons

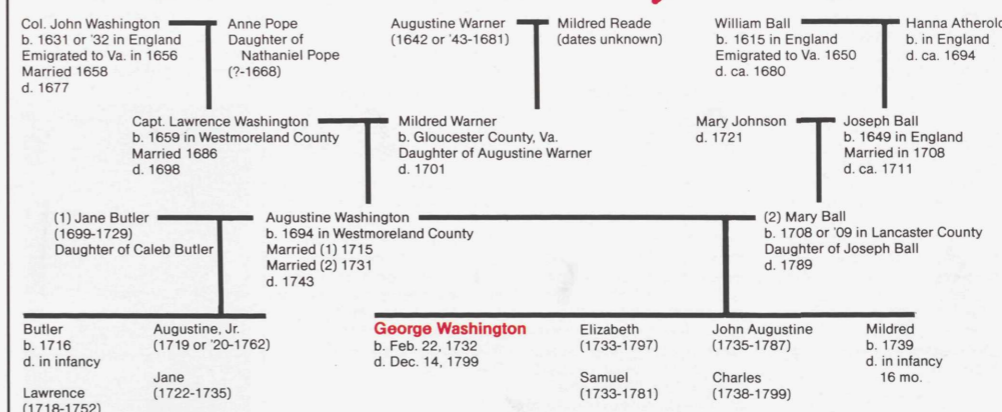
The story of the Washingtons was one of a slow but steady rise to prominence. Lawrence Washington was a prosperous clergyman in Essex who lost his position in 1643. His son John took to the sea, and in 1657 shipped out to America. He remained to marry the daughter of planter Nathaniel Pope, who gave the couple 700 acres on Mattox Creek to start their own tobacco farm. John steadily added land by using the "head-right" law to acquire a number of acres for every person he brought to Virginia. At one point he owned some 10,000 acres, including a nearby piece of land on Bridges Creek, where he moved in 1664, and another tract on Little Hunting Creek that would become Mount Vernon. He was a solid member of the middle planter class: vestryman, justice on the county court, member of the House of Burgesses, tax collector, an officer of militia, lawyer, and miller.

John's son Lawrence was born in 1659 on the Mattox Creek farm, which he inherited. He was schooled in England and married the daughter of a former member of the Governor's Council. Primarily a planter, he supplemented his income with an expanding legal practice and stood for election to several offices, serving as county justice, Burgess, captain of militia, and sheriff.

Augustine Washington, father of George, was born on the Mattox Creek farm in 1694. When Lawrence died, Augustine moved with his mother and stepfather to England. After his mother's death he returned to his inheritance in America, a piece of land along Bridges Creek. Augustine expanded his farm by purchasing land on nearby Popes Creek (1,300 acres at its greatest extent) and acquired the Little Hunting Creek property. He performed his public service as vestryman, county justice, militia captain, and sheriff and helped with the heavy tasks at his iron furnace. A year after his first wife died, he married Mary Ball, the orphaned daughter of a prominent planter. Their first child was George.

When Augustine died in 1743, he left his sons and daughters 10,000 acres and at least 48 slaves. As the third son, George inherited at the age of 11 a modest share of the estate, but he steadily added more land to his holdings over the years. When he married Martha Custis, widow of a wealthy planter, the joining of the two families' fortunes (and his inheritance of Mount Vernon) carried him into the Tidewater aristocracy.

*George Washington son to Augustine & Mary his Wife was born 22<sup>nd</sup> Day of February 1732*



"How much more delightful . . . is the task of making improvements on the earth, than all the vain glory which can be acquired from ravaging it, by the most uninterrupted career of conquests."

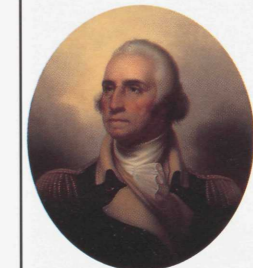
- 1732 Born at Popes Creek
- 1749 Appointed surveyor of Culpeper County, Va.
- 1752 Appointed major in Virginia militia
- 1754 Colonel of Virginia Regiment
- 1758 Elected to House of Burgesses; resigns commission
- 1759 Marries Martha Dandridge Custis
- 1761 Reelected Burgess; serves in several political offices until Revolution
- 1775 Elected General and Commander in Chief of the Continental Army.
- 1783 Resigns commission
- 1787 Elected president of Constitutional Convention
- 1789 Elected President of the United States
- 1792 Reelected President
- 1797 Retires from Presidency
- 1799 Dies at Mount Vernon

**Washington's Homes**  
All his life Washington owned residences in Virginia's Tidewater region, never further than a 3-day's ride from his birthplace at Popes Creek in Westmoreland County. He spent his first 3½ years there, after which his father took the family 80 miles up the Potomac to Little Hunting Creek (later called Mount Vernon), where George lived until he was 6.

To be closer to one of his iron businesses, Washington's father moved the family again in 1738 to Ferry Farm, across the Rappahannock River from Fredericksburg. George was 11 when his father died in 1743. His half brothers Lawrence and Augustine inherited Little Hunting Creek and Popes Creek plantations, respectively, while George was to take ownership of Ferry Farm when he came of age. Until he was 16, he lived there with his mother, but also lived for long periods with Augustine at Popes Creek, learning more about farming, and at Little Hunting Creek (renamed Mount Vernon by Lawrence), learning the ways of society. By the time he had reached his majority, he regarded Mount Vernon as his home.

Two years after Lawrence died in 1752, George rented Mount Vernon from his brother's widow. When she died in 1761, George inherited Mount Vernon, and lived there for the rest of his life.

This portrait by Rembrandt Peale, painted in 1795, was one of the last done of Washington.  
Mount Vernon Ladies Association



# Popes Creek Plantation

## George Washington Birthplace National Monument Virginia

**For Your Safety**  
Do not feed or touch the animals or enter the pastures or pens. Poison ivy is common in the area. Please watch where you step.



## Tobacco, Masters, and Slaves

The image of the leisured, aristocratic Virginia planter has proven a durable one, but it is wide of the mark. Everyone in this isolated colony either learned to be self-sufficient or returned to England. While their dependency on slaves allowed them to avoid physical labor, even the wealthiest planters were busy men, and the mid-sized planters like Augustine Washington had to master many trades and work long days to achieve prosperity. A planter was surveyor, architect, construction foreman, farm and business manager, lawyer, frequent host, and doctor to his slaves. His wife was equally busy running the house and often supervising the slaves in domestic operations like cooking, candlemaking, and spinning and weaving.

Most of the planter's time was mortgaged to the "noxious weed" as the plantation year revolved around the plant. The slaves prepared new fields in the fall by felling trees and plowing around the stumps; started the plants in seed beds around Christmas time; burned the fields and hoed them into hills in February; transplanted the seedlings when they were the "breadth of

a shilling" in the spring; cultivated soil and picked worms through the summer; cut out unwanted leaves weekly; cut off the tops when the plants passed the optimum height; harvested in August; stripped the stems; tied the leaves into bundles; dried the leaves in the sun; cured them in



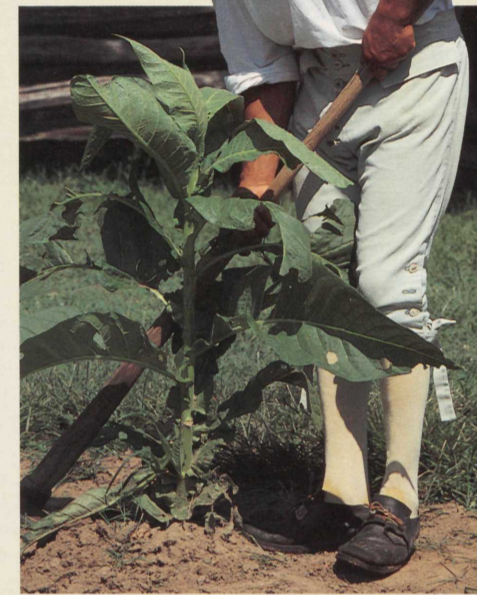
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tobacco sheds; pressed them into large casks called hogsheads. Even with all this care, a drought, too much rain, canker worms or birds, or reasons unknown could produce a small crop or poor quality tobacco. But generally, especially for the larger planters, tobacco proved a dependable and profitable cash crop. Because the area was riddled with navigable rivers and creeks,

many tobacco farms, including Popes Creek, did not need a central shipping point. Slaves rolled hogsheads down to the planter's own wharf and ferried them to a vessel waiting offshore. By that time others were already preparing the beds for the next year's crop.

Such a labor-intensive operation in a sparsely-populated colony could not have functioned without slave labor. During Washington's childhood, his father kept 20 to 25 slaves on his home plantation. Though most slaves on Virginia plantations were given English names (Tom, Kate, Jack) some were allowed to use Anglicized versions of their African names: "Jemmy," from Quame, and "Phillis," from Fili. A master technically owned his slaves, but in practice his control was rarely absolute. He could not afford perpetually discontented workers who could undermine his operation, so he often granted them limited social and economic self-determination and even leeway in setting the pace of work. Some planters called their slaves "family," but this did not keep them from selling them or using the whip.

Virginia slaves in this period were beginning to form strong African-American communities. By 1730 only a third were African-born. While enslavement was a great leveler, forcing those who in Africa had been slaves and slave owners to live and work together, a hierarchy soon developed. House slaves were the elite, with the artisans a step below and the field hands at the bottom. The first two groups lived in cabins near the master's house, and the field hands, often the newest African arrivals, lived near where they worked. The quarters were the root of community and family networks that grew to encompass several plantations. There the slaves adapted African child-rearing customs to new conditions and, before the mass conversions of the late 18th century, practiced their native religion mixed with Christian elements. Master was also influenced by slave, from his music to the way he used his time. Within the bounds of servitude, African-American slaves shaped a strong culture that gave them a degree of control over their lives.



A living history interpreter demonstrates one of the endless tasks of tobacco growing: cultivating the soil around mature tobacco plants. 18th-century farming techniques and domestic crafts are demonstrated year round, with increased activities from June to Labor Day.

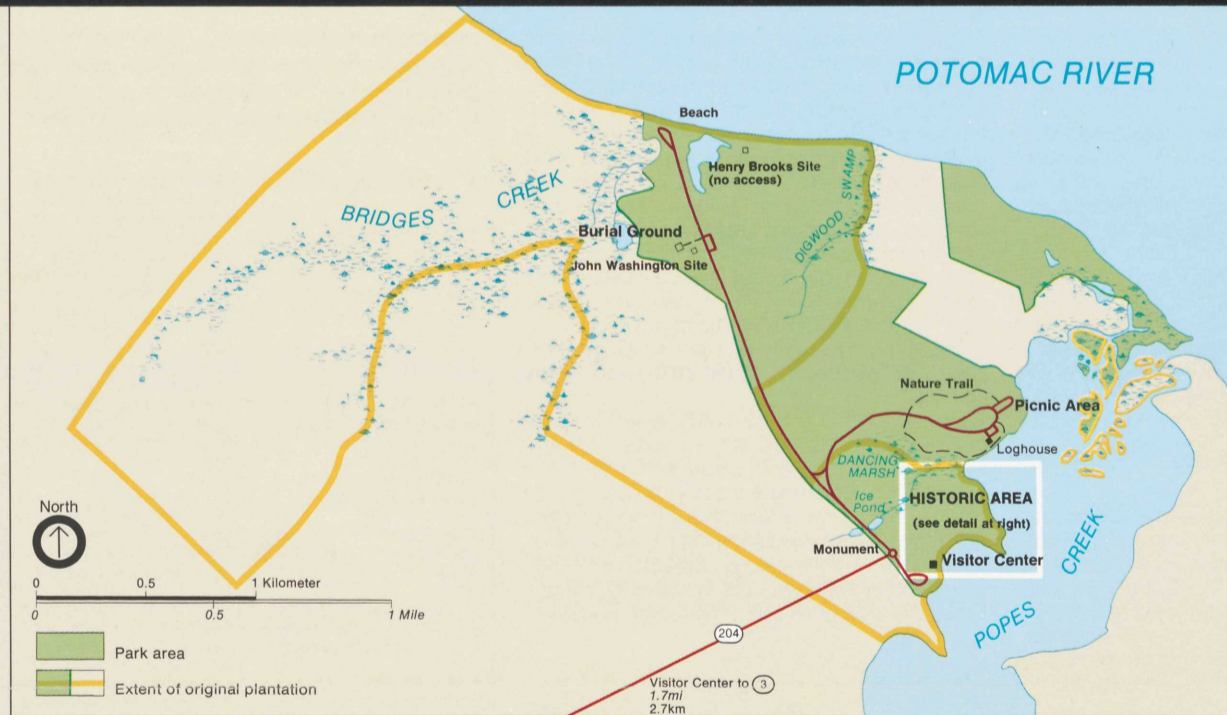
**A Reminder**  
To help us preserve this historic area, please observe the following regulations:

- Plant and animal life, ground cover, buildings, and historical artifacts above and below ground are protected by Federal law and must be left undisturbed.
- Fishing is permitted only at the picnic area and Potomac River beach.
- Firearms are prohibited.
- Pets must be physically controlled at all times.

## Colonial Living Farm

Though most of the acreage was devoted to tobacco, corn, and wheat, the plantation also had to produce 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. On the present farm, established in 1968, the livestock, poultry, and crops are of old varieties and breeds and are raised by farming methods that were common during colonial times. In the kitchen house, costumed interpreters show how candles and soap were made in 18th-century Virginia. Others perform the steps in cloth production: preparation of the raw flax fiber, spinning, dyeing, and weaving.

## Visiting the Park



The way of life into which George Washington was born at Popes Creek flowered early in the nation's history and died some 200 years ago, but George Washington Birthplace evokes the spirit of the 18th-century Virginia tobacco farm. The farm buildings, groves of trees, livestock, gardens, fields of tobacco and wheat, rivers and creeks—these were the earliest scenes of Washington's childhood and the kind of surroundings in which he reached maturity.



In 1858 the Commonwealth of Virginia acquired the homesite and the burial ground to mark and protect them, but the Civil War ended those plans. Virginia donated the land to the Federal Government in 1882. The Wakefield National Memorial Association was formed in 1923 to recover and restore the birthplace grounds. In 1930, the grounds were authorized as a National Monument. By the following year, the association, aided by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., had acquired and transferred to the government enough land to bring the holding to 394 acres. The park was officially opened under the administration of the National Park Service in 1932, the 200th anniversary of Washington's birth.

**The Memorial Shaft** In 1896, a granite shaft was erected on the site where the Memorial House would be built. It was moved in 1930 to its present location. The obelisk of Vermont marble is a one-tenth replica of the Washington Monument in the Nation's capital.

**The Burial Ground** When John Washington, George's great-grandfather, settled in the Bridges Creek area, he established a family burial ground near his house. Thirty-two burials have been found at this location, including those of George's half-brother, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. Replicas of two original grave-stones, along with five memorial tablets placed here in the 1930s, may be viewed within the modern brick enclosure.

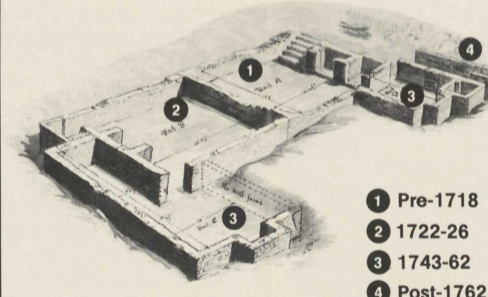
George Washington Birthplace is on the Potomac River, 38 miles east of Fredericksburg, Va., and is accessible via Va. 3 and Va. 204. The park is open every day except December 25 and January 1. A nominal fee is charged.

Park facilities include the historic birthplace home area, colonial farm, burial ground, hiking trails, beach, and picnic area. Swimming and camping facilities are not provided.

George Washington Birthplace National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is RR 1, Box 717, Washington's Birthplace, VA 22443, is in charge. Call (804) 224-1732.

## The Historic Area

**Birthplace Site**  
The house in which George Washington was born no longer stands, but we know a good deal about it. Washington's father Augustine paid a local "undertaker" 5,000 pounds of tobacco to build the first of three additions to his home. It was not a grand house, but large enough by 1762 to hold 10 bedsteads, 13 tables, 57 chairs, 8 chests, tools for 8 fireplaces, and



- 1 Pre-1718
- 2 1722-26
- 3 1743-62
- 4 Post-1762

**Kitchen House**  
The brick chimney of the Washington kitchen house was the last part of the original birthplace still standing in 1873, when it collapsed. It was located about 80 feet from the main house. This was a common practice of the period, to keep cooking odors out of the house and to avoid fire. After



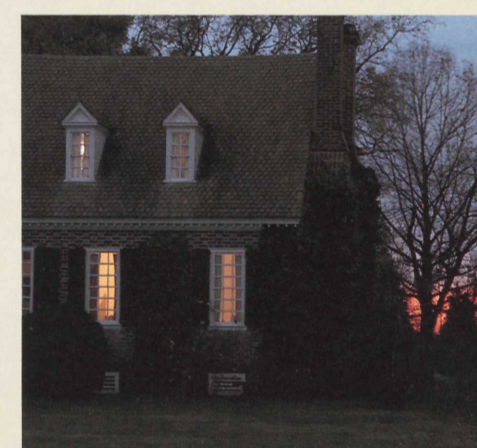
numerous other household goods. Compared to the one-room dwellings inhabited by most Virginians, the Washingtons' was a fine manor house.

After Washington's brother Augustine, Jr., who had inherited the house, died in 1762, the house passed to his son William Augustine. On Christmas Day, 1779, while George Washington was far to the north

with the Continental Army, the place of his birth burned. It was never rebuilt.

After the house was excavated in 1936, its foundations were covered over to preserve them. Today its location and dimensions are indicated by an oyster shell outline.

This sketch of the birthplace foundations, made when they were excavated in 1936, indicates a U-shaped house with four chimneys, a cellar, and at least 10 rooms. The first section of the house was built before 1718. The last addition was completed no later than the mid-1770s.



**Memorial House**  
Constructed as a memorial to George Washington in 1930-31, this building is not a replica of his birthplace. It represents rather a typical house of the upper classes of the period—probably a bit finer than Washington's birthplace. The bricks were handmade from the

clay of a nearby field. It has a central hallway and four rooms on each floor, furnished in the 1730-1750 period style by the Wakefield National Memorial Association. A tea table is believed to have been in the original house. Most of the other furnishings are more than 200 years old.

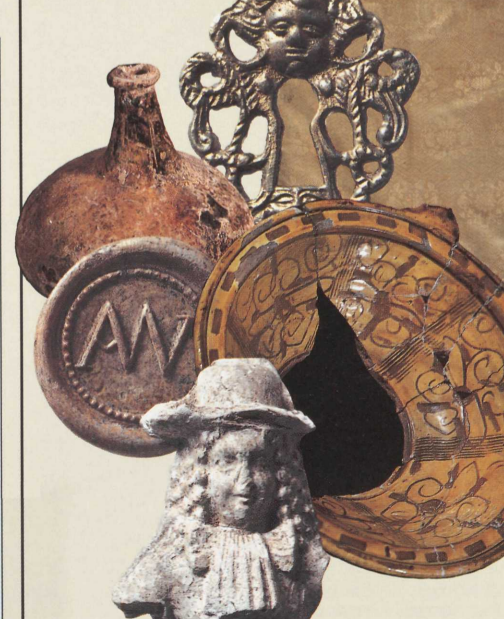


## The Past Preserved

On several occasions since 1896, archeologists have searched Augustine Washington's land for remains of his son's birthplace site. Until 1930, it was commonly believed that the birthplace was the building over whose foundations the Memorial House was built. That year new foundations were discovered ("building X"), which sparked a controversy over the location of the birthplace. When the new foundations were excavated in 1936, it became evident that this much larger building was the main house and Washington's birthplace, while

the previously discovered foundations were those of a smaller outbuilding of undetermined use. The foundations of the kitchen, dairy, and another unidentified outbuilding have also been excavated. The thousands of artifacts—ceramics, jewelry, glass, clay pipes, and hardware—unearthed among these buildings have been invaluable clues to the interpretation of the site, furnishing of the Memorial House, and reconstruction of the working colonial farm.

From top, clockwise: Washington's christening robe, sgraffito (scratched) ware bowl, clay figurine, Augustine Washington's wine bottle seal, wine bottle, keyhole plate. All except the robe were unearthed at Popes Creek.



Smithsonian Institution