

# George Washington Birthplace

George Washington Birthplace  
National Monument  
Virginia

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Washington's birthplace on the banks of Popes Creek  
NPS/DAVID T. COLBERT

## Origins of a Public Man

George Washington is the most elusive of national heroes. His great 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 an example to schoolchildren, Washington the man began to disappear behind the model. "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. While we have little information about Washington's earliest 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.

Living at Popes Creek until he was almost four, spending long periods here as an adolescent, he watched his father's slaves work the farm and later helped his brother run it. He lived close to the natural world, forming his deep, lifelong attachment to the land, his character developing to the slow rhythms of farm life. His family was solidly entrenched in the Virginia tidewater culture, and he absorbed its ideals and values, becoming their most famous exemplar. We can understand these influences by engaging ourselves with the past at Popes Creek. As the august symbol we know as George Washington was created in the imaginations of an earlier America, we can use our own imaginations here at Popes Creek to move closer to the man.



Tobacco, Virginia's major export and a common currency, was taken to market via the region's rivers and tributaries.  
NPS/GREG HARLIN



Early colonists had to clear dense tidewater forests for homes and fields. The downed timber became their major building material.  
NPS/GREG HARLIN

## Washington's Tidewater World

The culture that shaped Washington was founded on abundant land and numerous waterways. The James, York, Rappahannock, and Potomac rivers bore colonial merchant traffic inland as far as the rocky fall line, where the flat, tidal stretches of the rivers ended. Fertile peninsulas between these rivers were covered with forests broken by large fields of wheat, corn, and above all, tobacco.

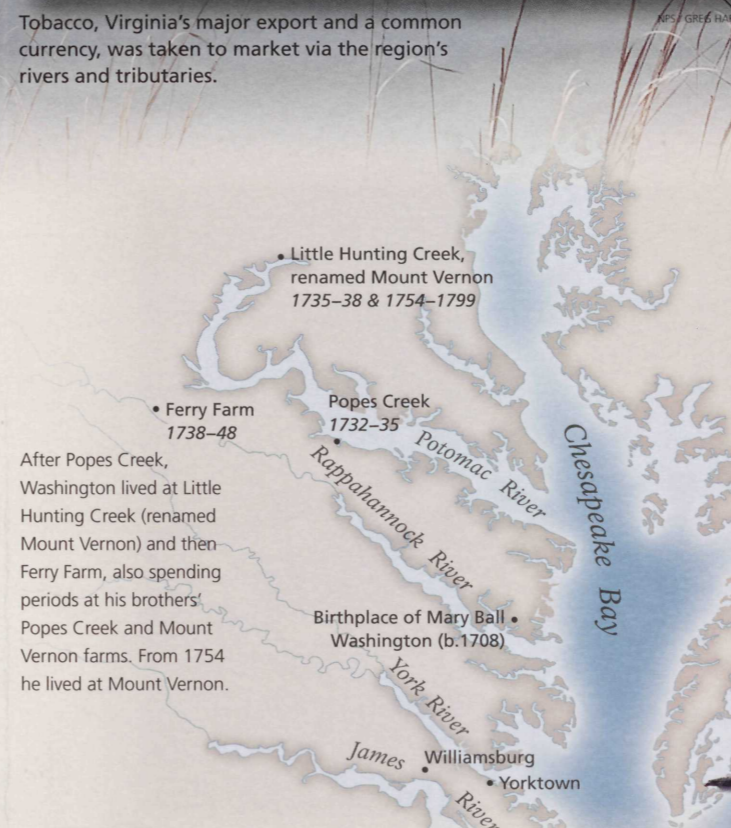
Larger planters dominated the colony, forming a ruling class that perpetuated itself through intermarriage and inheritance. Public service was another defining characteristic: Vestryman in the Anglican church, county justice, Burgess, sheriff, officer in the militia—positions of authority confirming a planter's status.

### Rise of the Washingtons

John Washington came to Virginia in 1657 on a small trading venture, then stayed to marry the daughter of planter Nathaniel Pope. Pope gave the couple 700 acres on Mattox Creek to start their own tobacco farm. John steadily added land until he owned 10,000 acres, including a nearby piece of land on Bridges Creek and another tract on Little Hunting Creek that would

become the famed Mount Vernon. His son Lawrence, born in 1659, was schooled in England and married the daughter of a former member of the Governor's Council.

Their son Augustine expanded his inheritance by purchasing land on nearby Popes Creek. A year after his first wife died, Augustine married Mary Ball, the orphaned daughter of a prominent planter. George Washington was their first child. When Augustine died in 1743, George inherited a modest share of the estate, but steadily added 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 them into the tidewater aristocracy.



After Popes Creek, Washington lived at Little Hunting Creek (renamed Mount Vernon) and then Ferry Farm, also spending periods at his brothers' Popes Creek and Mount Vernon farms. From 1754 he lived at Mount Vernon.



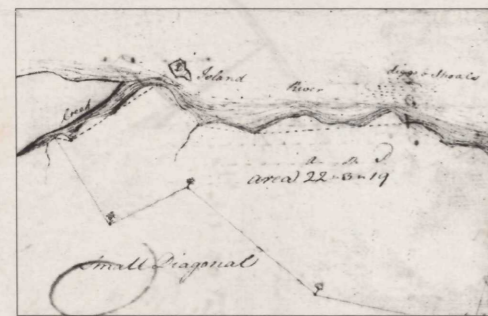
The timber-framed home that George Washington's great-grandfather John built around 1664 near Bridges Creek (see view on reverse), looked something like these conjectural buildings. Tidewater's characteristic brick dwellings would come later.  
NPS/GREG HARLIN

Excavations at Bridges Creek and Popes Creek turned up daily items used in 1700s Virginia: iron farrier's nippers (for shoeing a horse), a ceramic wine bottle, and a ceramic wine bottle seal with the initials of Washington's father Augustine.  
NPS



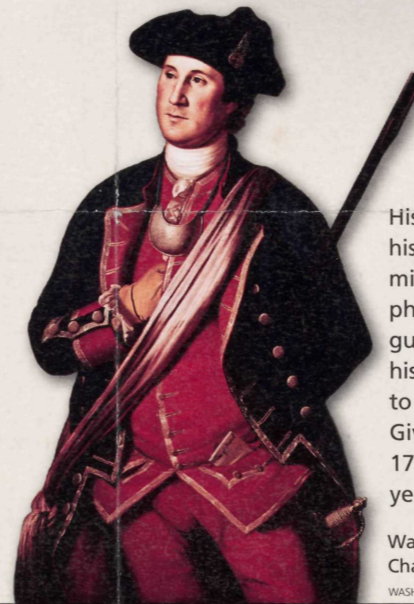
## Surveyor . . . Soldier . . . Farmer

*"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."*



At 15 Washington surveyed the Bridges Creek area, now within the park. It is his earliest preserved map.  
SURVEY AND COMPASS IMAGE AT LEFT: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Washington's hopes for the English education received by his older brothers ended when his father died. Forbade a naval career by his mother, he studied surveying, a profession that opened doors. He surveyed the lands of Lord Fairfax, forging a connection with the powerful family and acquiring his own tracts of western land.



His military career began when he obtained his late brother's commission in the Virginia militia. His superb horsemanship, imposing physical stature, and solid judgment distinguished the young officer. After he resigned his commission he devoted the next 17 years to expanding and improving Mount Vernon. Given command of the Continental Army in 1775, he didn't see his home again for six years.

Washington in his Virginia Regiment uniform; Charles Willson Peale, 1772.  
WASHINGTON-CUSTIS-LEE COLLECTION, WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Driven by duty and ambition, Washington spent much of his life in public service. But through his years as military man, elected representative, and president he was at heart a farmer. His Popes Creek childhood and early years on family plantations fostered in him a love for the land that always pulled him back to Mount Vernon.

**1732** Born Feb. 22 at Popes Creek, in Westmoreland County, Va., to Augustine and Mary Ball Washington.

**1748** Member of surveying expedition to Shenandoah Valley.

**1749** Appointed surveyor of Culpeper County, Va.

**1753** Leads party investigating French encroachments on Virginia's western lands.

**1754** Appointed lieutenant colonel in Virginia militia raised to challenge French presence in Ohio Valley; leases Mount Vernon from widow of brother Lawrence.

**1755** Aide-de-camp to Gen. Edward Braddock in campaign against French. Braddock is defeated, but Washington gains experience. Upon return, appointed commander of Virginia Regiment.

**1758** Commands part of force that takes Fort Duquesne from French; resigns commission; returns to Mount Vernon and devotes himself to farming; elected to House of Burgesses.

**1759** Marries Martha Dandridge Custis; becomes legal guardian of her children Martha and John Parke Custis.

**1761** Inherits Mount Vernon from brother Lawrence's widow.

**1775** Elected General of Continental Army.

**1781** John Parke Custis dies; Martha and George raise two of his children, George Washington Parke Custis and Eleanor Parke Custis.

**1783** Resigns commission; returns to farming.

**1787** Presides over Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia.

**1789** Elected President of the United States.

**1792** Reelected U.S. president.

**1797** Second term as president ends; returns to farming.

**1799** Dies at Mount Vernon.

Above: Washington at Mount Vernon. Below: Surveyor's compass used by Washington.



MOUNT VERNON LADIES ASSOCIATION

# Popes Creek

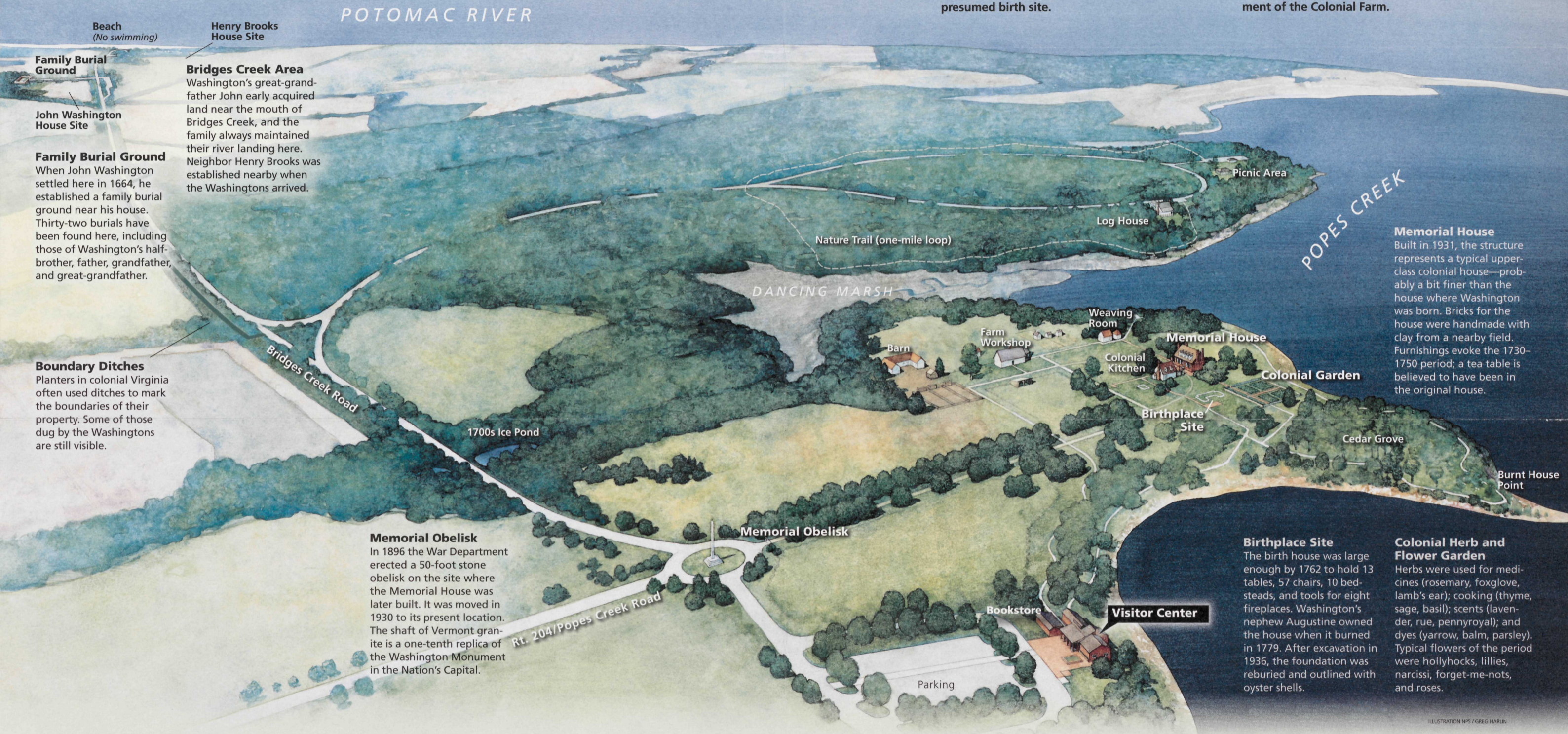
*“How much more delightful . . . is the task of making improvements on the earth, than all the vain glory which can be acquired from ravaging it, by the most uninterrupted career of conquests.”*

—George Washington, letter to English agriculturalist Arthur Young, 1788

## Washington’s Living Memorial

The evolving memorialization of Washington at his birthplace reveals something about us as well. The farm had fallen into ruin by 1815 when Washington’s adopted grandson George Washington Parke Custis visited the site and placed a small stone marker at what he thought were the ruins of the birth house. In 1858 the state of Virginia acquired the farm, then called Wakefield, but the Civil War suspended memorialization plans. Virginia conveyed the site to the U.S. War Department in 1882, to be managed by the Army Corps of Engineers, who in 1896 erected a granite obelisk over the foundations of the presumed birth site.

In the 1920s the Wakefield National Memorial Association, with help from John D. Rockefeller, acquired more original land, and the grounds became a national monument in 1930. The group built a Colonial Revival-style house at the traditional birth site in 1930, moving the obelisk to its present site. To enhance what they saw as a living memorial, they added a Colonial Kitchen and Colonial Garden and preserved a historic cedar grove. In 1936 the foundation of the actual birth house was unearthed, then reburied to protect it. The concept of a living memorial was expanded in 1968 with the establishment of the Colonial Farm.



**Beach (No swimming)**

**Henry Brooks House Site**

**Family Burial Ground**

**John Washington House Site**

**Family Burial Ground**  
When John Washington settled here in 1664, he established a family burial ground near his house. Thirty-two burials have been found here, including those of Washington’s half-brother, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather.

**Boundary Ditches**  
Planters in colonial Virginia often used ditches to mark the boundaries of their property. Some of those dug by the Washingtons are still visible.

**Bridges Creek Area**  
Washington’s great-grandfather John early acquired land near the mouth of Bridges Creek, and the family always maintained their river landing here. Neighbor Henry Brooks was established nearby when the Washingtons arrived.

POTOMAC RIVER

POPES CREEK

**Memorial House**  
Built in 1931, the structure represents a typical upper-class colonial house—probably a bit finer than the house where Washington was born. Bricks for the house were handmade with clay from a nearby field. Furnishings evoke the 1730–1750 period; a tea table is believed to have been in the original house.

**Memorial Obelisk**  
In 1896 the War Department erected a 50-foot stone obelisk on the site where the Memorial House was later built. It was moved in 1930 to its present location. The shaft of Vermont granite is a one-tenth replica of the Washington Monument in the Nation’s Capital.

**Birthplace Site**  
The birth house was large enough by 1762 to hold 13 tables, 57 chairs, 10 bedsteads, and tools for eight fireplaces. Washington’s nephew Augustine owned the house when it burned in 1779. After excavation in 1936, the foundation was reburied and outlined with oyster shells.

**Colonial Herb and Flower Garden**  
Herbs were used for medicines (rosemary, foxglove, lamb’s ear); cooking (thyme, sage, basil); scents (lavender, rue, pennyroyal); and dyes (yarrow, balm, parsley). Typical flowers of the period were hollyhocks, lilies, narcissi, forget-me-nots, and roses.

## A Working Tobacco Farm

In colonial Virginia even wealthy planters were busy men, and mid-sized farmers like Washington’s father Augustine had to master many trades and work long days to prosper. Of Popes Creek’s 1,300 acres, mostly woodland and pasture, only about 15 were devoted to his cash crop. Tobacco required constant attention, and such a labor-intensive operation in a sparsely populated colony depended on enslaved workers—20 to 25 at Popes Creek. Because the area was laced with navigable rivers and creeks, many tobacco farms like Popes Creek did not need a central shipping point. In the fall, slaves rolled hogheads of cured tobacco to Augustine’s wharf and ferried them to a vessel waiting offshore. Workers in the fields were already preparing seedbeds for the next year’s crop.



Tobacco field



Hog Island sheep

## Touring the Grounds

The loop walk from the visitor center takes you past a historic red cedar grove to the Washington Birthplace Site and the Memorial House, Colonial Kitchen, and Colonial Garden. Beyond these are replicas of typical colonial farm buildings and the crops and heritage breeds of the Colonial Farm (left). On the Bridges Creek Road out past the Memorial Obelisk and historic ice pond is the Family Burial Ground. At the end of the road was the Bridges Creek landing from which the Washingtons shipped their tobacco.

George Washington Birthplace is open every day except Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. There is a nominal fee. Ranger talks are offered most days. Park facilities include a one-mile Nature Trail, Picnic Area, and Log House (for special events). Swimming and camping facilities are not provided.

**Accessibility** The park is accessible with some assistance. Service animals are welcome.

George Washington Birthplace is on the Potomac River, 38 miles east of

Fredericksburg, Va., and is reached via Va. 3 and Va. 204.

**For your safety** and to help us preserve the area, please observe the following regulations: • Camping and swimming at the beach are not permitted. • Be careful near the river bluffs. • Plant and animal life, buildings, and artifacts are protected by federal law and must not be disturbed or removed. • Fishing is permitted only at the picnic area and the Potomac River beach. • Possession of firearms is governed by Virginia law. See park website for more information. • Pets are not allowed in the

historic area or on the Nature Trail and must be on a leash in other areas of the park.

**More Information**  
George Washington Birthplace National Monument  
1732 Popes Creek Road  
Washington’s Birthplace  
VA 22443  
804-224-1732  
[www.nps.gov/gewa](http://www.nps.gov/gewa)

George Washington Birthplace is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about parks and National Park Service programs in America’s communities, visit [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).

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