



**Your on the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**Presidential Places  
George Washington's Birthplace**

## Presidential Places

George Washington	Birthplace
Andrew Jackson	Home and Grave
Abraham Lincoln	Home, Museum, and Tomb
Herbert Hoover	Childhood Home, Museum, and Grave
Harry Truman	Birthplace, Home, and Museum/Library
Dwight D. Eisenhower	Childhood Home and Museum
Ronald Reagan	Museum and Grave
Richard Nixon	Childhood Home, Museum, and Grave
George H.W. Bush	Museum/Library
William Clinton	Childhood Home
William Clinton	Museum/Library
George W. Bush	Museum/Library

Reflections on Visits to Presidential Places: Government Graft

Pending:

George Washington	Mount Vernon
Thomas Jefferson	Monticello
James Madison	Montpelier

And others as I travel America

## Presidential Places

Hundreds of books, movies, and television programs are available about the homes, libraries, museums, birth, and burial places of America's Presidents. I cannot hope to replicate these works, nor do I wish to. My hope is that the essays in the *Presidential Places* series offer different and humorous perspectives about several of America's revered historical places.

Many of the places we visit in this series are called *libraries*. They are unique places containing historical information about America in general and specifically about an American president during his time in office.

Here is one definition of such a library: "A repository of historical information, where many books are kept."

Here is an alternate and more accurate definition: "A repository of historical information, where many books are kept away from the public."

Here is another definition of a presidential library, "A library, whose contents are forbidden to be examined by people who paid admission to enter the library and examine its contents in the first place. Therefore, Disneyland-like exhibits are created to placate the crowd."

A fourth definition: "Thinly disguised attempt to bolster the public image of a former President."

These definitions are acceptable to those who flock to presidential places. After all, presidential places are crowded places. The visitors must be curious about White House dinner menus, presidential pins, catchy campaign slogans, first-ladies' gowns, and other artifacts of American politics. Because these places vary in how they are named, I use the words *museum* and *library* interchangeably. It appears most of the places have buildings and rooms that serve both as museums and libraries.

In each of these places I visited, I had my fill of political drivel. But of more importance, I witnessed a deep sense of pride the site creators have about these places. And time and again, I beheld the thankfulness and patriotism of American citizens who were aware, while knowing America's faults, that the country offered a better way of life than many other nations. Even with tongue in cheek, I carried away a sense of American citizens' reverence for America and for America's Presidents' contributions to this legacy.

It is my goal in *Presidential Places* to provide you with some lesser-known and humorous aspects of Americana as well as a sense of the pride and patriotism of the sites' creators and visitors.

Unless otherwise noted, the cover page depicting the face of a U.S. President is sourced from Google.

## George Washington's Birthplace<sup>1</sup>

This series is devoted to places where United States Presidents once resided, where they are now “retired,” and any museums or libraries housing their presidential artifacts. The reports reflect my personal visits, so I will not hand-down second-hand information in these essays. For better or worse, they are original.

Fittingly, our first visit is the birthplace of America's first president, George Washington. This site is located in an area of Northern Virginia called the Tidewater Basin, also named the Northern Neck---a short distance from Washington, DC. Figure 1 shows the Northern Neck, with a red circle around the site of Washington's first home. Three cities where Washington spent much of his adult time are also shown in the map. He visited Alexandria<sup>2</sup> more times than Washington, DC, as the latter did not exist as the Capital until a year after his death. For most of Washington's life, the place where DC is now located was not much more than a swamp. Alexandria was the seaport hub for this part of the colonies, and Washington journeyed there several times.

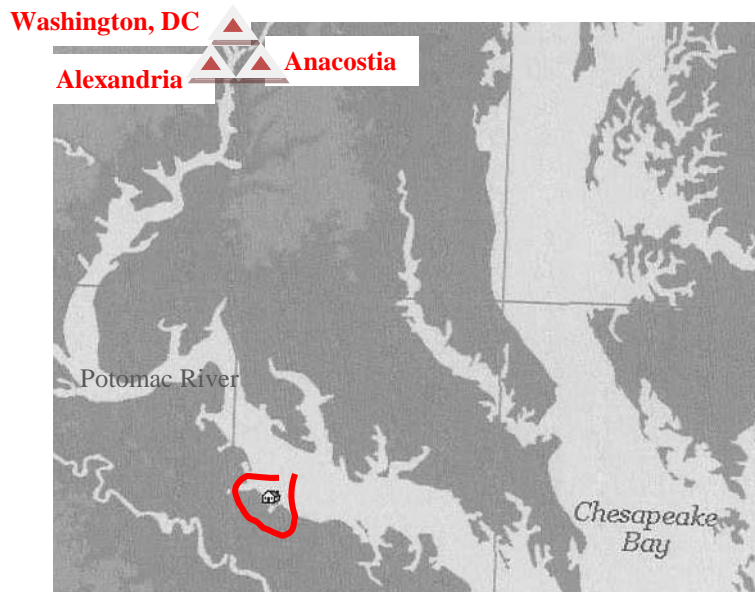


Figure 1. Northern Neck at Washington's Birth Place.

As the crow flies, a trip from his birthplace to Alexandria was about 70 miles. It is unlikely young George made this trip very much as he lived at this place only from his birth to age six. His neighbors and father likely rode to Alexandria for business and supplies. As we will see when we visit Washington's second home, a shorter trip was to Fredericksburg (about 35 miles away), which was also a source for provisions.

<sup>1</sup> Unless cited otherwise, pictures are sourced from U.S. Government material and books/pamphlets/brochures available at the visitor center at this site.

<sup>2</sup> When I was living in the area, Alexandria used to boast of places where, “Washington slept here.” In the 1970s on its main street was the Washington Inn, reportedly a hanging-out spot for our first president. During my more recent visits to Alexandria, I did not see any of these remembrances on display.

Given the roads and trails in those days, the non-crow trek was probably close to 80 or 90 miles; a full two days of riding 9 to 11 hours, with few pauses.<sup>3</sup>

The drive from Alexandria to this site took two to three hours, and I stopped for directions and gas. It took two to three days for Washington's father to make this trip, and Mr. Washington had no iPhone to keep himself entertained. We can only imagine how discomfoting it would be today to take several days to go so short a distance. But perhaps not. What can be uncomfortable about riding a horse through miles upon miles of virgin forests and streams?

I have long wanted to visit this place. From some of my earlier reports, you may have gathered I like history. I sometimes wish I were a Shirley McLaine: to go back in time and witness past events. For this journey, we went back to past times, but unlike Shirley, we had a vicarious trip.

### Washington's Early Home?

As mentioned, the drive to this part of the Northern Neck takes a couple-or-so hours from the Washington, DC area. To prepare for the visit, I surfed the Web for background information and came up with thousands of pages documenting the place on Northern Neck.

Figure 2 shows the layout of Washington's birthplace.<sup>4</sup> The site is on Popes Creek, which is part of the Potomac River. Archeologists have unearthed several structures shown in the figure, but several of the notations in this map deal with creations of today, not those of the past.



Figure 2. Layout of George Washington's birthplace.

The map in Figure 2 does not convey what a beautiful place the Washington family chose for their home. Figure 3 provides a better idea of the home and surrounding terrain and water.

<sup>3</sup> Assuming the horse makes four to five miles per hour. Put your treadmill on to 4.5 MPH. You will see it is a fast walk. A reasonable walk for a horse is at about this pace. Some horses are capable of a slow, smooth gait for many hours, which would have shortened the journey.

<sup>4</sup> National Park Service visitor's brochure.

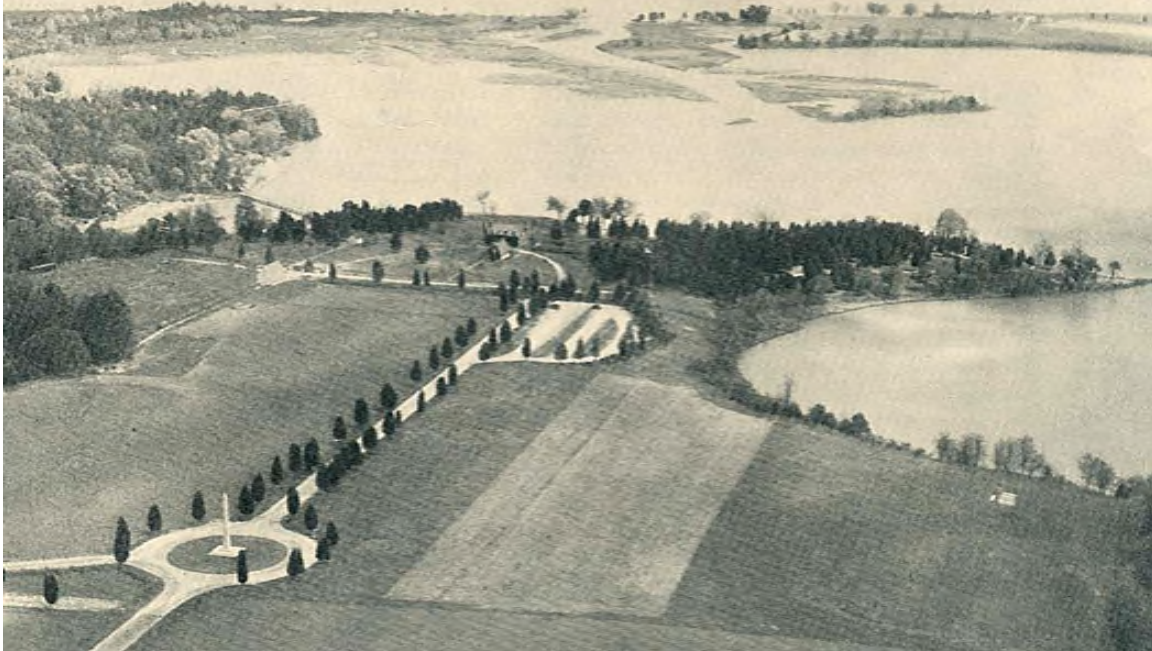


Figure 3. An aerial view.

### The Home?

We visited Washington's home to discover there was no home. It had long been destroyed. Very well, maybe we could take a look at his barns. Nope. The slave's kitchen? No. Popes Creek to the side of his home? At least Popes Creek was intact.

The advertisements show an impressive 17<sup>th</sup> Century upper class home, with a separate kitchen, and barns, as depicted by the top picture in Figure 4.<sup>5</sup>

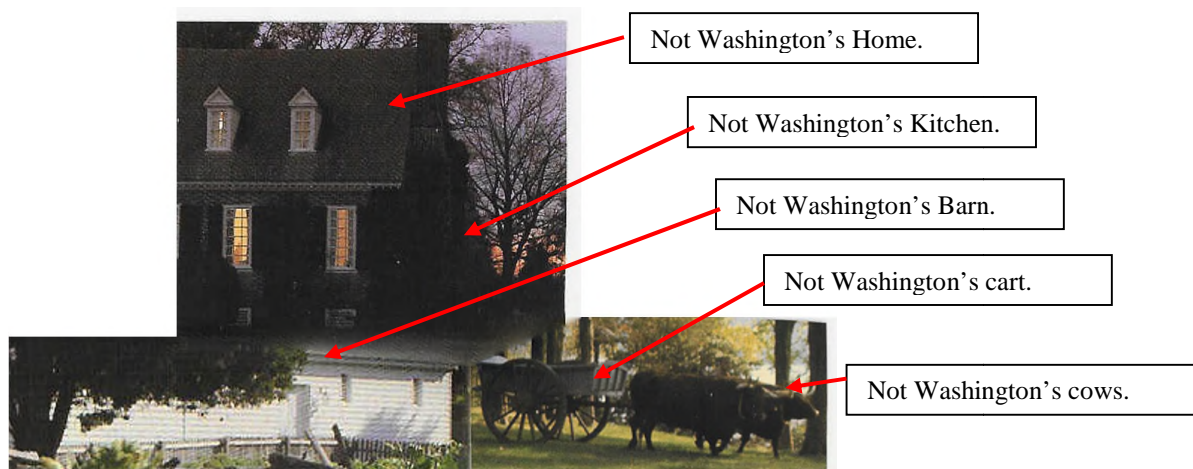


Figure 4. Washington's virtual birthplace and associated virtual buildings.

As you can see from my annotations, Washington's home does not contain anything that is Washingtonian---only representations. The house was built a few decades ago. The barn is also of recent vintage. The cart is new and the cows are strolling along without a driver to guide them.

<sup>5</sup> Photographs from visitor's center and author.

The sponsors of this site (The National Park Service) brochure reads: “The home where Washington was born burned down in 1789. A memorial house was built near the spot in 1930.” Nonetheless, some of this landscape is of old vintage. Here is an excerpt from a Department of the Interior brochure.

This view shows the memorial mansion, erected in 1931 and dedicated May 14, 1932. The giant hackberry tree in front of the doorway is said to have grown from a root sprout after the parent tree was killed by the fire which destroyed the original birthplace house. The fig bush seen to the right of the hackberry tree and over the top of the roses originated from roots of fig trees growing on the grounds at the time that Washington lived here. The boxwood in the center along the walk leading from the house to the garden was brought from the old home of Sarah Tayloe Washington, about 8 miles from Wakefield, and is about 125 years old

### **The Home**

The original house site was excavated in 1936, revealing its foundation. Archeologists have been able to piece-together a history of the home and the additions made to it during its lifetime. Figure 5 shows the shape of the house, and the archeologists’ assessment of how it evolved and how it might have looked. Figure 6 is a photo of the current layout.

The architecture shown in Figure 6 was typical of the times when Washington lived at Popes Creek. The foundation shown in Figure 5 is not the same as the reconstruction shown in Figure 6, but I was told by a National Park Service guide that the model is intended to reflect the style of architecture prevalent in the 1700s, not necessarily George’s home. Nonetheless, the foundations show large rooms, which was common practice in order to cool the interiors. What the foundations do not show is a common feature in those early homes of a large central passage in the middle of the house, with perfectly symmetrical wings on each side.

By the standards of some (but not many) of the Virginia estates of those days, this home was not a grand manor, but sufficiently large to qualify the Washington family as a member of the upper strata of Northern Virginia society (the Cavaliers). The eight fireplaces in the home were seven more than most Virginians had in their hovels.

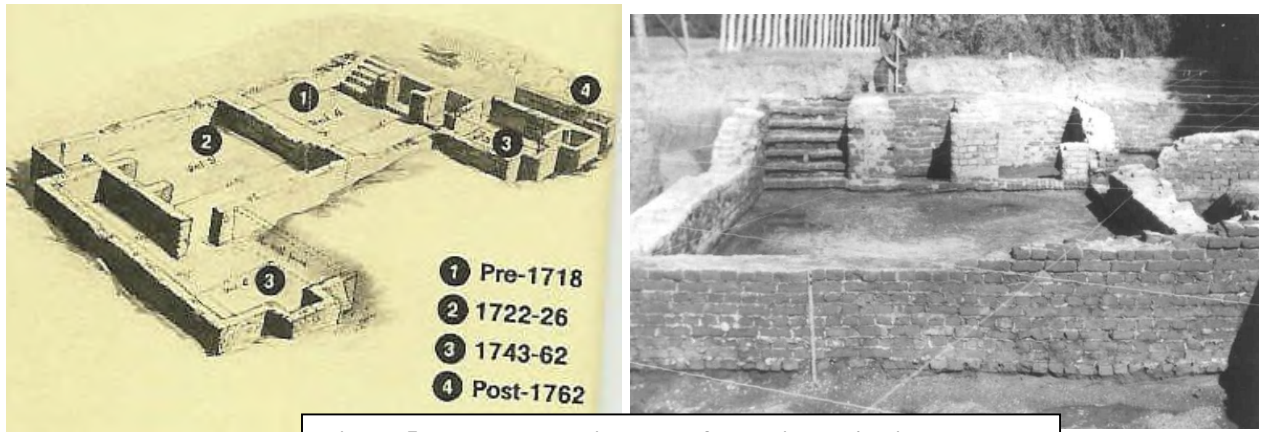


Figure 5. Probable architecture of Washington's birthplace.



Figure 6. The current layout.

I also doubt if this house was made of bricks. Most houses, even large ones, were of wood. Mount Vernon (covered in another essay) is made of wood. However, brick building developed in Virginia during the 17<sup>th</sup> century and used the same conventions as England, even the size of the bricks, and the manner in which they were laid. Virginia had (and has) ample clay which could be fired to a variety of beautiful colors.

In constructing the building shown in Figure 6, a brick kiln was constructed on the site. It was of the Dutch style, known as an up draft design. Clay was taken from a nearby pit, and the fires were from local oak and chestnut trees. Figure 7 shows this kiln.





**Figure 7. The kiln used to fire the bricks for the memorial house.**

We have only touched the surface of this fascinating place in America's history. If you happen to be in the Washington, DC area, make it a point to take a day-trip to Washington's birthplace. It's a beautiful drive unto itself. You will be back in the Washington, DC area in time to see the Washington Monument set against the beautiful and subdued skyline.