

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS

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During the nineteenth century the United States very few holidays were universally celebrated. Some Europeans commented on the lack of celebrations in America and an English actress, Fanny Kemble, wrote in 1832, "Comparatively no observances of tides and times punctuated the American years." New Year's Day and Christmas were celebrated by some in specific areas or by different nationalities but were not country-wide celebrations. Valentine's Day [refer the archived "Virginia's Veranda"] was celebrated but it was not a holiday observance. There was little mention of Halloween [refer to the archived "Virginia's Veranda"] until the 1870's. Thanksgiving [refer to "Virginia's Veranda"] was a special day set aside for giving thanks but it was not celebrated on a specific day until 1863, when President Lincoln proclaimed the fourth Thursday of November a national day of thanks. The Fourth of July seems to have been one holiday that was celebrated all over the country. Another celebration day honored George Washington on his birthday since he was an admired personage and it was considered reason for a holiday. Observances of this day were country-wide and ranged from balls, cannon fire, parades, and speeches to washing clothes.

The birthday of George Washington has not always been celebrated on the same day. Washington was born on February 11, 1731. [This date doesn't look familiar, but in 1751 the English Parliament adopted the Gregorian calendar and added eleven days to the calendar, which changed the date of Washington's birth to February 22, 1732. Old habits die hard and some people did not recognize the calendar change; in fact Washington continued to celebrate his birthday on February 11 until the early 1790's.] In 1968 [the law became effective in 1971] the U. S. Congress enacted Public Law 90-363 which combined Washington's and Lincoln's (February 12) birthdays and the official celebrated date is the third Monday of February.

According to historical records, Washington's birthday was first celebrated at Valley Forge on February 11, 1778 (Washington was 46 years old) with a serenade by the band of the Fourth Continental Artillery. In 1781, Count de Rochambeau honored Washington by a declaration of celebration in Newport, Rhode Island. "French troops paraded through the city and the French and American officers dined together." Richmond, Virginia claims to have held the first public celebration to honor Washington; in 1782 a celebration was held on February 11 and "demonstrations of joy" filled the city. Talbot Courthouse, Maryland, and Cambridge, Massachusetts all had special celebrations to honor Washington's fifty-first birthday on February 11, 1783, but New York City is generally recognized as the first location to institute a public celebration to honor Washington on February 22. In the New York harbor a gun sounded a salute and "a number of men dined together, heard speeches praising Washington, and exchanged thirteen toasts – one for each of the original thirteen colonies." During his first term of office, Congress adjourned their session in New York City on February 22, 1790 in order to honor Washington. On February 22, 1791 and the capital was moved to Philadelphia the day continued to be celebrated. After Washington's death on December 14, 1799, Congress passed a resolution calling the nation to observe February 22, 1800 with "appropriate exercises" for the day.

Some of activities for the celebration of Washington's birthday included balls and birthnight balls. In the February 26, 1779 issue of the *Virginia Gazette* in Williamsburg, Virginia reported a ball was held in honor of Washington. The *Virginia Herald* of Alexandria, Virginia and the *Fredericksburg Advertiser* reported that a birthday ball was held for Washington in Alexandria on February 11, 1780. Gadsby's Tavern held a the first recognized Birthnight Ball for Washington on February 10, 1797, even though Washington could not attend because he was still in Philadelphia. Notices were placed in both *The Times* and *Alexandria Advertiser*, inviting all "Ladies of Alexandria and its vicinity on both sides of the Potomac" to the ball and indicated where gentlemen could purchase tickets. In 1798, after Washington returned to Mount Vernon Gadsby's hosted the ball on February 11, 1798. On February 11, 1799 Gadsby's held the last Birthnight Ball during his lifetime, but after his death, the tradition continued. The *Alexandria Gazette* ran the following advertisement on February 18, 1803. "The Gentlemen of Alexandria and its vicinity are respectfully informed, that an Assembly will be given at Gadsby's Hotel, on the 22nd instant [February], in commemoration of the Nativity of Washington." These balls continued to be held until the outbreak of the Civil War. In 1932 the American Legion post #22 restarted the tradition of Birthnight balls but it was not an annual affair and it was not until 1976 that the Birthnight balls became an annual tradition Gadsby's in Alexandria.

The western territories used Washington's Birthday as a celebration time. "A ball celebrating Washington's Birthday was given this evening in 1846 by Captain H.M. Knighton and Lady at Oregon City. The celebration postponed until this date because the 22nd was a Sabbath, was well attended by Oregon settlers and officers from H.M.S. Modeste. Everything reportedly went smoothly as 'evidence of intoxication was happily absent.'"

George Washington's birthday was also observed by marching bands and the firing of cannons. It seems that cannon fire was a common mode of celebrating a number of holidays in the nineteenth century, such as New Year's, the Fourth of July, Halloween and Christmas, as well as Washington's birthday. In 1859, Horace Elisha Scudder wrote on his travels in Texas and included Washington's birthday a celebration. He wrote, "'On Washington's Birthday the chief spectacle had been entrusted to the Alamo Rifles and the San Antonio Fire Company. 'The Rifles, twenty-four guns, marched round the Military Plaza, followed by the S. A. Fire Company with the engine drawn by four horses who raced off in every direction but the right one, and accompanied by a very rabble of Mexican and Germans of all ages and sexes, but chiefly little boys. The procession was led by two bands, one for the Militia and one for the Fire Company which played opposition tunes.'"

Another account came from Wesleyan College in Middleton, Connecticut. It seems that the students had been firing the Douglas Cannon in honor of July 4, but in 1859 the college schedule changed and classes were not in session on the Fourth. Not wanting to forgo their patriotic exercises they included the cannon fire on Washington's birthday celebration. The firing of the cannon was called a "cannon scrap." and the observance grew throughout the nineteenth century and included a banquet and orations.

According to a number of newspaper reports, the Civil War did not deter the celebrations for Washington's birthday. The *Xenia Torch-Light* of Xenia, Ohio reported various war-time observances in Xenia and other parts of the country. On February 27, 1861 it reported, "The

22d –the 128th anniversary of Washington's birthday -- was more generally honored throughout the Union, than has been the case for years. Here in Xenia a national salute was fired, and the Stars and Stripes unfurled.

–At Louisville, Kentucky, the day was enthusiastically celebrated by the raising of the stars and stripes over the Court House by the ladies, which was witnessed by the largest crowd ever seen in Kentucky. The Star Spangled Banner was sung by an immense number of voices.

–At Chicago, the "whole people are out in their majesty." The display exceeded any demonstration ever made in that city. The Wigwam was crowded - patriotic addresses were delivered - Washington's Farewell address read - and at the close, the whole immense audience rose to their feet and joined in singing the Star Spangled Banner.

–At Richmond, Virginia, the city was gaily and properly decked with the Star Spangled Banner, and a patriot spirit ruled the hour.

–And so throughout the country. In these dark times, the thoughts and the affections of the people flow back to that great Patriot who led the army of his fellow patriots to secure the political structure which the rebels of the South would now destroy.”

On February 19, 1862 the *Xenia Torch-Light* included a program for the observance.

“Washington's Birth-Day.

Anniversary Exercises at McMillan Hall,

On Saturday Evening, Feb. 22, 1862.

Order of Exercises.

1. Music by the Xenia Band;
2. Prayer, by the Rev. R.D. Harper;
3. Music by the 74th Regimental Band;
4. Address - "Washington, the Soldier and Statesman" - by William K. Sherwin, Esq.;
5. Music, Xenia Band;
6. Address - "Washington's Generals of Foreign Birth" - by Lieut.-Col. Von Schrader;
7. Music, Regimental Band;
8. Address - "Washington, the Christian Patriot" - by the Rev. Col. Granville Moody. R.F. Howard, Esq., President of the Evening; Vice-Presidents - T.C. Wright, M.D. Gatch, E.H. Munger, A.H. Baughman, and James Kyle, Esqrs.

The entertainment will be free for all. Exercises will begin soon after 7 o'clock. Citizens and soldiers cordially invited. Come early.”

Apparently the preceding program did not go according to planned because on February 26, 1862 the *Xenia Torch-Light* reported, “The 22d in Xenia.

There was some little hitch in the programme of proceedings here on Washington's Birth-Day. At the instance of the military, notice was given that a parade and celebration would be had during the day - but the unexpected order for the removal of the Regiment to Camp Chase compelled a relinquishment of the military feature, and required the attention of Col. Moody and Lieut. Col. Von Schrader to matters other than speech-making. But in the evening a fine audience gathered in the Court-room - Mr. J.C.McMillan was called to the chair, assisted by Capt. McDowell and Capt. Bassford. The proceedings of the evening were opened with a most fervent and appropriate prayer by the Rev. P.C. Prugh; and W.K. Sherwin, Esq., addressed the audience for an hour and a half upon the character and career of Washington as a military man. At the conclusion of his remarks, a motion was made by Mr. Prugh to invite the citizens of Xenia

to furnish a supply of food to the boys of the 74th for their use while being transferred to Camp Chase. Upon this motion and another by President Smith for the appointment of a committee to carry out the intention of the first, the Rev. W.T. Findly made a few remarks; at the conclusion of which, the meeting adjourned, with three rousing cheers for the Union.”

The Missouri Democrat, in its February 23, 1862 issue, described a huge city-wide celebration of Washington’s birthday. The city was decorated with red, white and blue banners and flags. The procession was eleven miles long, began at noon and did not end until 5 pm. Participants included the military, notables in the community, ordinary citizens, various business and civic associations, bands, people in carriages, on foot and on horseback, children in wagons and omnibuses, and wagons displaying advertisements. The event ended with an evening celebration consisting of band music, songs by the choir, a reading of Washington’s Farewell address, and the usual orations.

The *Galveston Weekly [Texas] News* reported on February 18, 1863, “Washington's Birthday.—The entertainment to be given by the ladies of Houston for the benefit of Hood's Brigade, on the anniversary of the birthday of the "Father of his Country," will take place at Perkins' Hall on Monday evening, the 23d inst. [February]. Our amateurs are exerting themselves with the greatest enthusiasm to make this the most agreeable and exciting affair of the season. If they accomplish half the good they propose, it will satisfy the most exacting seeker for novelty and amusement.”

The Little Rock, Arkansas *Unconditional Union* for March 4, 1864 included a military demonstration for the occasion. “Washington's Birthday Celebration, February 22.—The 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th Ohio volunteer Militia, and companies of the Ohio Volunteer Militia, from the country, the 5th Ohio, with other veteran regiments, and companies that may be in the city on February 22, will assemble on Race street, right resting on Twelfth, displaying northward in the following order, viz: 5th Ohio and other veterans; companies of the Ohio Volunteer Militia from the country; 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th regiments; wounded soldiers in carriages. Line of March: east on Twelfth to Main; north on Main to Fifteenth; west on Fifteenth to Central avenue; south on Central avenue to Fourth; east on Fourth to Vine; south on Vine to Third; east on Third to Broadway; north on Broadway to Sixth; west on Sixth to Elm, where parade will be dismissed. The column will move at half past ten A. M., precisely. Regiments and companies not on the ground at that time will fall in, in the rear of the procession on the march.

L. A. Harris,
Colonel Commanding.”

The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Correspondence contained mentions of Washington’s birthday observances. “WASHINGTON, February 21, 1865.

Major-General McDOWELL:

Ordered, That a national salute be fired to-morrow noon, February 22, at West Point, and at every fort, arsenal, and army headquarters of the United States, in honor of the restoration of the flag of the Union upon Fort Sumter.

By order of the Secretary of War:

E. D. TOWNSEND,

Assistant Adjutant-General.

As the delay in the receipt of the foregoing does not permit the execution of the order on the date named, the anniversary of Washington's birthday, the salutes will be fired to-morrow, at noon, from every battery and fort in the harbor and Benicia, and at all other forts in this department on the day next succeeding the receipt of this order. When the salute is fired the entire command will be paraded under arms and give three times three cheers for that noble, glorious, sacred old flag of the Union, the Stars and Stripes, now so soon, under God's favor, to be restored throughout the length and breadth of our land.

By command of Major-General McDowell:

R. C. DRUM,
Assistant Adjutant-General.”

War-time mentions of Washington's birthday in diaries showed a different aspect of the celebrations than those described in newspapers. (Both northern and southern diaries were chosen to give a balanced viewpoint.)

Growing up in Canandigua, New York, Caroline Cowels Richards mentioned Washington's birthday in her diary (1852-1872) twice. On February 22, 1856 she wrote about requesting a holiday from school because it was Washington's birthday and said they [some girls of her acquaintance] felt very patriotic but the teacher denied their request. Instead he allowed them to have a musical review and literary exercises in the afternoon school session. In 1862 she wrote, “Patriotic services were held in the Congregational Church this morning. Madame Anna Bishop sang, and National songs were sung. Hon. James C. Smith read Washington's Farewell Address. In the afternoon a party of twenty-two, young and old, took a ride in the Seminary boat.... We carried flags and made it a patriotic occasion.”

Salome (Sallie) Myers Stewart, a teacher from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, wrote on February 22, 1862, “The Porter Guards were in town and had some kind of demonstration in honor of the birthday of ‘The father of his country.’” In 1864 she wrote, “Washington's birthday. At home all day. Washing. It was really enough to bring the old gentleman out of his grave but I could not help it.”

It is interesting in southern diaries written in 1862 that Jefferson Davis' inauguration was foremost in their minds rather than Washington's birthday. Emma Holmes of Charleston, South Carolina wrote on February 22, 1862, “The inauguration of President Davis will take place, the birthday of Gen. Washington having been selected from which to date the event of the inauguration of the first president of the Southern Confederacy.”

John B. Jones, of Richmond, Virginia, made several mentions of Washington's birthday in his diary. On February 22, 1862 he wrote of Davis' inauguration in Richmond, VA but there was no indication that it was Washington's birthday and only described the inauguration. In 1863, he did mention that it was Washington's birthday, but stressed that it was the anniversary of Davis' inauguration. In 1864 he wrote, “The offices are closed today, in honor of Washington's birthday” and there was no further mention of the holiday in his diary.

Judith McGuire, originally from Alexandria, Virginia kept a diary throughout the war as she and her husband refuged to various locations and ended up in Richmond, Virginia. In 1862 the only mention of February 22 was in relationship to Davis' inauguration. In 1863, she wrote from Ashland, Virginia, "Washington's birthday is forgotten, or only remembered with a sigh by his own Virginia." No further mention was made.

After the Civil War, celebrations continued as before. John Austin Edwards wrote in his dissertation, "After the war Galveston {Texas} townspeople normally honored Washington in a variety of ways, mainly decorating the businesses and firing a canon, with occasional parades. In 1867 Galveston citizens decorated ships in the harbors, fastened bunting on businesses, and had the military fire the "customary salute."

After the Civil War, the Washington's Birthday celebrations continued and holiday parties were instituted which included games for children. The following came from the book *Games for Everybody* by May C. Hoffman.

Washington's Birthday.

"For a party on this day, the room should be decorated with flags, hatchets, etc., and red, white, and blue bunting, so as to add a patriotic air to everything.

A picture of Washington may be cut in many pieces for a puzzle. The one who succeeds in putting the picture together in the shortest time receives a prize, which may be a large picture of Washington.

A cherry tree may be represented by using a branch of any tree and decorating it with small candy cherries. If these cannot be obtained, any kind of candy may be wrapped in red tissue paper and tied to the branch. The players are blindfolded one at a time, given a pair of scissors, and requested to "cut off a cherry."

To add to the fun small paper hatchets may be hidden around the room for the players to find, as in a peanut hunt.

The head of a hatchet may be drawn on a sheet which is tacked to the wall, and the players are given cloth handles which they are to pin to the sheet while blindfolded. The one who succeeds in pinning his handle nearest to the proper place may be awarded a prize."

Washington's Birthday was also recognized abroad. Robert Burns wrote in 1794, "Ode for General Washington's Birthday" where he compared Washington to William Wallace in his attempt to free Scotland from England.

Despite date changes, wars, and eventually sharing the holiday with Lincoln, we still remember George Washington on his birthday, but do we take the time to honor him? Maybe washing clothes wasn't any worse than people today enjoying a day off from work and shopping at the Washington's birthday sales.

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