2006

Birthing Washington: Objects, memory, and the creation of a national monument

Seth C. Bruggeman
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd
Part of the American Studies Commons, Museum Studies Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-nvqt-y969

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
BIRTHING WASHINGTON
Objects, Memory, and the Creation of a National Monument

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the American Studies Program
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By
Seth Charles Bruggeman
2006
APPROVAL SHEET

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of

The requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Seth Charles Bruggeman

Approved by the Committee, August 2006

Scott R. Nelson, Chair

Barbara Carson

Cary Carson

Arthur Knight

Patricia West, Curator
Martin Van Buren National Historic Site
National Park Service
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS vi
LIST OF FIGURES viii
ABBREVIATIONS x
ABSTRACT xi

INTRODUCTION: BIRTHING WASHINGTON 2

The Washingtons at Popes Creek 5
Washington's Birthplace Remembered 7
The Curious Case of Building X 13
The Legacy of Building X and the Failure of Radical Signification 16
Objects, Memory, and Public History at Washington's Birthplace 18

I. THE FIRST STONE 31

Birthplaces, Monuments, and Memory in the Early Republic 34
Historical Objects and the Romantic Imagination 43
Saints, Relics, and the Systematization of Medieval Object Fetishism 49
Sacred Past, Secular History: Origins of the Historic Object 54
Charles Willson Peale and the Persistence of Object Fetishism 59
Objects, the Occult, and the Relic in the United States 62
George Washington Parke Custis, Re-enactor 69

II. COSTUMED LADIES AND FEDERAL AGENTS 72

The Colonial Revival in Form and Theory 76
Of Dollhouses and Historical Meaning 84
Josephine Wheelwright Rust and the Wakefield National Memorial Association 93
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With absolutely no offense intended to our first president, never would I have imagined prior to this project that I might write my dissertation, let alone anything else for that matter, about George Washington. Blame and thanks for that entirely unforeseen turn of events goes to Heather Huyck and Rich Lowry who, together, set me on the path to Wakefield. There I met a wonderful cast of characters who, while assisting my research of the administrative history that inspired this project, demonstrated with good humor and admirable commitment how prominent Washington’s memory remains in the Northern Neck today. I extend thanks to the entire staff of the George Washington Birthplace National Monument with special gratitude to Superintendent Vidal Martinez, Ranger Dick Lahey, Resources Manager Rijk Morawe, and Ranger Roberta Samuel.

Beyond the birthplace, a number of individuals deserve special mention for answering my questions and asking their own. Katie Rust recalled for me summers in Marblehead in the commanding presence of her late husband’s grandmother. Fredericksburg historian Paula S. Felder provided crucial insights regarding Charles Hoppin’s role in the WNMA’s public relations campaign. And NPS Photo Archivist Tom DuRant brightened a grey day at the NPS Harpers Ferry Center with good cheer and a peek at Horace Albright’s home movies.

Most of the research undertaken in the course of this project unfolded in the archives at Washington’s birthplace, a small room staff affectionately call the “cage.” When not locked in the cage, I received vital assistance from employees at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., College Park, MD, and Philadelphia, PA. The ladies of the Westmoreland County Museum and Library provided valuable help as did the research staff at the Hagley Museum and Library in Wilmington, DE. Librarians and interlibrary loan staff at the College of William & Mary’s Swem Library, Mary Washington University’s Simpson Library, and the University of Kansas’s Watson Library kept me in books.

It is impossible to list all of the good folks at the College of William & Mary who, in one way or the other, contributed to this endeavor. From the American Studies Program, Grey Gundaker, Chandos Brown, and Rich Lowry played formative roles in shaping how I understand objects and memory. Kim Phillips helped me navigate a host of bureaucratic inconveniences thus affording me the time and sanity to bring this project to completion. Arthur Knight was generous enough to answer a late need for committee expertise. Barbara Carson and Cary Carson, also gracious committee members, have provided immeasurable support and kindness on and off campus for my entire graduate career. Patricia West, curator at the Martin Van Buren National Historic Site, agreed to comment on this dissertation despite a million more deserving demands on her time. And Scott R. Nelson, from William & Mary’s history department, walked me through the entire process without ever letting me know that a dissertation can be anything less than excellent. He is a model chair, a superb scholar, and a good friend.
I reserve final thanks for those whom I can never thank enough. Charles and Deborah Bruggeman are my parents and friends. Any good that I do is a credit to their unflinching love and support. Hilary Iris Lowe improved every page of this manuscript with her editorial acumen and sustaining companionship.
LIST OF FIGURES

1. THE NORTHERN NECK 277
2. GEORGE WASHINGTON PARKE CUSTIS 278
3. THE FIRST STONE 279
4. WASHINGTON APOTHEOSIS PITCHER 280
5. WASHINGTON RELIC JEWELRY 281
6. WAR DEPARTMENT MONUMENT 282
7. 1876 COLONIAL KITCHEN 283
8. JOSEPHINE WHEELRIGHT RUST 284
9. INSPECTING WAKEFIELD 285
10. THE WASHINGTON FAMILY BURIAL GROUND 286
11. THE WESTMORELAND COUNTY MUSEUM AND LIBRARY 287
12. 1896 EXCAVATION 288
13. 1926 EXCAVATION 289
14. WAKEFIELD CHINA 290
15. BUILDING X 291
16. MEMORIAL HOUSE COMMEMORATIVE TABLET 292
17. LOG HOUSE EXTERIOR 293
18. MEMORIAL HOUSE FURNISHINGS 294
19. WAKEFIELD LADIES 295
20. WNMA GREENHOUSE 296
21. MEMORIAL HOUSE BASEMENT 297
22. POSTWAR TOURISTS 298
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>MAP OF WASHINGTON’S BIRTHPLACE, 1933</td>
<td>299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>APPROACHING THE MONUMENT</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>SUPERINTENDENT HOUGH</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>HACKBERRY TREE</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>COLONIAL CROPS</td>
<td>303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>COLONIAL CROP LAYOUT</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>BUILDING X MARKED</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>LIVING HISTORY AT WASHINGTON’S BIRTHPLACE</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>PUPPET SHOWS</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>LIVING HISTORY TODAY</td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABBREVIATIONS

CCC  Civilian Conservation Corps
CIP  Comprehensive Interpretive Plan
FAC  United States Fine Arts Commission
GEWA  George Washington Birthplace National Monument Archives
GWBM  George Washington Birthplace Memorial Association
HFC  National Park Service Harpers Ferry Center
HFCA  National Park Service Harpers Ferry Center Archives
MVLA  Mount Vernon Ladies Association
NAB  National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.
NACP  National Archives, College Park, MD
NAMAR  National Archives, Mid-Atlantic Region, Philadelphia, PA
NPS  National Park Service
RG  Record Group
SAR  Superintendent’s Annual Report
SMR  Superintendent’s Monthly Report
THST  Thomas Stone National Historic Site
WNMA  Wakefield National Memorial Association
ABSTRACT

The National Park Service’s (NPS) George Washington Birthplace National Monument has commemorated Washington and his life for over seventy-five years. For much of that time, the NPS worked closely with the memorial’s progenitors, the ‘ladies’ of the Wakefield National Memorial Association (WNMA). Although equally committed to the preservation of Washington’s legacy, these two groups clashed over questions of authenticity, historical authority, and proper commemorative strategy. This dissertation explores their relationship for what it reveals about the rise of public history in this country and Federal involvement therein.

We witness at Washington’s birthplace a collision between old-order Colonial Revivalists (led for a time by renowned preservationist Louise DuPont Crowninshield) and a new generation of male museum professionals under NPS Director Horace Albright. The WNMA erected a ‘replica’ Memorial House atop a site marked in 1815 by George Washington Parke Custis. The NPS determined the Memorial House was neither properly located nor an authentic replica. Still, the WNMA defended the building’s veracity. “Birthing Washington” argues that the two groups defined authenticity differently and that those definitions reflected not only gendered difference and political motivation, but also new ways of constituting historical knowledge available during the first half of the twentieth century.

What began as a confused argument about authenticity manifested publicly in decisions made about what kind of objects to display at Washington’s birthplace and how to display them. The WNMA preferred charming interiors to the NPS’s stark historical realism. Both methods created considerable interpretive possibilities and limitations. Buoyed by national trends, historical realism prevailed at Washington’s birthplace. But ‘living history’ only created new interpretive dilemmas by failing to grapple with old questions about authenticity perpetuated by the Memorial House’s ongoing presence. I conclude that sites of public memory cannot help but reify the historical currents of their formative moments and, for that reason, the NPS must challenge itself to interpret the history of commemoration at sites like Washington’s birthplace.
BIRTHING WASHINGTON

Objects, Memory, and the Creation of a National Monument
INTRODUCTION

BIRTHING WASHINGTON

The National Park Service's George Washington Birthplace National Monument celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in 2005. The Monument is located about forty miles east of Fredericksburg, Virginia in a rural corner of what locals refer to as the commonwealth's Northern Neck (figure 1). It hosts about 100,000 paying visitors every year and is variously referred to as Wakefield and Popes Creek Plantation. As far as National Park Service (NPS) historic sites go, Washington's birthplace is a modest place. The landscape is beautiful, the people are friendly, and an hour or so will acquaint you with most of what the site has to offer. Although Washington's birthplace is one of the oldest historic sites in the park system, it has remained in a relatively constant state of developmental stagnation in part because not much ever happened there, at least nothing of much importance in the life of George Washington.

George was born in Westmoreland County, Virginia near the intersection of the Potomac River and Popes Creek in 1732. His father moved the family to Ferry Farm, Virginia when George was only three. When not eyeing cherry trees or flinging silver dollars across the Rappahannock River, George occasionally visited Popes Creek to
refine his surveying skills. He never returned for any extended period though and his family’s house—the house he was born in—burned to the ground in 1779. A patriotic ladies association called the Wakefield National Memorial Association (WNMA) built a “replica” of the house in 1930 on what they believed to be the exact site of Washington’s birth. As it turns out, the WNMA missed its mark by about fifty feet and took considerable liberties with the building’s design. Still, the Memorial House remains the site’s focal point and the NPS tries hard to interpret the impact this place had on the adult Washington’s sense of self and nation. Good intentions not withstanding, it’s a tough story to swallow.

Although the site did not figure prominently in Washington’s life, its acquisition did mark a pivotal moment in the history of the NPS. The NPS had already begun to dabble in historic sites by 1930 when it decided to entwine its fortunes with the WNMA at Popes Creek. Acquiring Washington’s birthplace, however, constituted a bold foray into public history. NPS Director Horace Albright considered it the beginning of his organization going “rather heavily into the historical park field.”1 Previous acquisitions like Sitka National Monument in Alaska and Scotts Bluff National Monument in Nebraska commemorated what historian Hal Rothman calls important cultural impulses of the American mainstream—in these cases, the conflict of cultures and westward migration respectively. Washington’s birthplace, however, conjured an even more specific and more immediate sense of the past. Never before had the NPS managed a site

---

so deeply entwined within the popular iconography of the nation's historical
consciousness.  

Nor had the Agency previously managed a historical re-creation on par with the
WNMA's Memorial House. Beyond its architectural simulacrum, the Memorial House
boasted a number of furnished period rooms with the occasional costumed interpreter, not
unlike not-so-distant Colonial Williamsburg. Public excitement surrounding the
birthplace's opening helped cement the Agency's commitment to historical preservation
and laid the groundwork for the consolidation of all Federal historic sites under the NPS
during the 1930s. More significantly, though, it set the NPS on new—though, as we will
see—perilous paths of historical representation.

Consequently, the past seventy-five years have witnessed the Monument drift
between the high tide of interpretive innovation and the murky backwaters of marginal
significance. In between exists a fascinating story about memory, objects, and the
decisions made about both in the service of our country's historical imagination. My
purpose here is to write a history—part social, part cultural, and several parts
intellectual—of a tiny patch of land where numerous individuals have variously
commemorated George Washington's birth. This is neither a story about George
Washington nor necessarily about the memorialization of his birth, but rather one about
how and what we choose to remember and why those choices change over time.

---

2 Hal Rothman provides an excellent discussion of the Park's significance during the formative years of
NPS expansion into historic preservation in America's National Monuments: The Politics of Preservation
The Washingtons at Popes Creek

That anyone travels to the remote site of Washington’s birth is itself part of a larger story about the beginnings of this country. The Pissaek Indians roamed Virginia’s Northern Neck well before any Washington ever stepped foot on American soil. Eventually absorbed into the Powhatan Confederacy, the Pissaekcs erected seasonal oyster harvesting camps along Popes Creek and the Potomac River. Huge mounds of discarded oyster shells hidden beneath the soil consequently shape the topography of Washington’s birthplace today. Europeans did not permanently establish themselves in the area until the 1650s when Henry Brooks acquired 1,020 acres near Popes Creek. It was a treacherous claim, covered by dense forest and mosquito-infested swamps, but Brooks recognized his geographic advantage there within the periphery of the Atlantic World.

Brooks parceled out his tract in 1656. Nathaniel Pope, a wealthy Maryland Protestant who found life increasingly uncomfortable among Maryland’s Catholic majority, bought a portion of Brooks’ land to establish a more stable home place for his daughter Anne and her new husband, John Washington. In 1664, John and Anne built a home on the old Brooks tract, started a family, and established the American seat of the Washington family near the creek named after Anne’s father. John purchased more land

---


4 OCULUS, “Cultural Landscape Report,” v. 1, 2.3-2.5.

5 Ibid., 2.4, 2.8, 2.10-2.11. The Virginia Assembly organized Westmoreland County in 1653. Brooks settled on and then sold portions of his land even before the issue of his 1657 land patent.
and, like other well-to-do Virginians of the time, staked his fortunes on tobacco. By reinvesting tobacco profits into land expansion, John amassed a sizeable plantation.

John’s son Lawrence continued the process and handed down the operation to his own son Augustine Washington in 1698. The plantation reached a height of prosperity and efficiency under Augustine’s ownership. Augustine renovated and expanded a small house that a former landowner had previously erected along Popes Creek. He moved his family there in 1727, but tragedy intervened in 1729 when Augustine’s wife Jane Butler died leaving the widower with a new home, a massive plantation, and four children. He remarried in 1731 and Mary Ball Washington gave birth a year later to George Washington.

1732 was a good year to be born British in Virginia. The threat of Indian violence had more-or-less vanished with the waning of Native American power east of the Appalachians. The prosperity afforded Chesapeake tobacco planters by an ever-flourishing Atlantic economy enabled a growing plantocracy to consolidate political power through state assemblies. Virginia’s economy expanded dramatically during the early eighteenth century as continued importation of slaves augmented an already naturally expanding population of forced laborers. Washington’s birth unfolded during a period not yet complicated by slave revolt, the first Great Awakening, or the long years of conflict initiated by King George’s War. George did not, however, remain at Popes Creek for long. Augustine gradually relocated his family to Ferry Farm, Virginia where, about forty miles west of Popes Creek, he owned and operated a flourishing iron works. George moved to Ferry Farm at age three and spent most of his boyhood years there.
Although George Washington revisited Popes Creek and developed there his famous surveying skills, the histories of George Washington and of Popes Creek Plantation diverged by the 1740s. Augustine willed the family’s Popes Creek estate to George’s elder half-brother Augustine Jr. in 1743 who passed the land to his own son, William Augustine Washington, in 1762. William continued to live with his family in the old house (although he renamed the plantation Wakefield after Oliver Goldsmith’s 1766 novel, *The Vicar of Wakefield*) until it was destroyed by fire on Christmas day 1779. To this day, the spit of land where Washington’s birth house once stood is called “Burnt House Point.” William salvaged what he could and built a new home on a nearby plantation in 1784. The remaining wreckage yielded over time to erosion and relic hunters leaving nothing but a crumbling chimney and a scattering of bricks by 1815.

**Washington’s Birthplace Remembered**

It was this very absence of anything to indicate where Washington was born that motivated the earliest attempts to memorialize his birthplace. Washington’s adopted grandson, George Washington Parke Custis, first marked the site in 1815. The circumstances surrounding this early memorialization are cloudy, but various accounts tell of Custis placing an inscribed stone atop a pile of bricks adjacent to a crumbling chimney presumed to be the last remaining vestige of Washington’s birth house. Whether or not that presumption was correct is uncertain. What is certain, however, is that local farmers periodically relocated Custis’s small monument over the years.

---


---

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Nonetheless, the Custis memorial found its way into the recesses of local memory as marking the precise location of Washington’s birth.\textsuperscript{7}

The Custis memorial—and likely several replacements—marked the presumed site of Washington’s birth for over forty years. Meanwhile, portions of what had been Popes Creek Plantation fell into the hands of Lewis Washington who sought a more appropriate recognition of the site. In 1858, Washington deeded a sixty-foot square parcel of land surrounding the Custis memorial to the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Commonwealth promised to protect the site and erect there a more substantial monument. Its plans suffered, however, from the business of disunion and war. Virginia, economically devastated by the Civil War, emerged from the conflict unable to honor its deal with Washington. Although the Commonwealth never did make good on its promise to Lewis Washington, the deal did mark the beginning of government involvement in the memorialization of Washington’s birthplace and, consequently, preserved the authority of Custis’s memorial.

A patriotic post-war U.S. Congress, eager to encourage reunion, recognized the national historical significance of Washington’s birthplace and, in 1879, dispatched Secretary of State William E. Evarts and a survey party to survey the site.\textsuperscript{8} Although Evarts could not locate the Custis memorial, he did discover the remains of a crumbling chimney and, after consulting with local landowners who recalled the Custis memorial being adjacent to the chimney, requested that Congress appropriate funds to memorialize

\textsuperscript{7}See Beasley, “The Birthplace of a Chief,” 199-201; Carson, “The Growth and Evolution of Interpretation,” 4111-4115; and Hatch, \textit{Popes Creek Plantation}, 64-69 for descriptions of Custis’s visit and early attempts to ascertain the correct site. Also see Oculus, “Cultural Landscape Report,” v. 1, 2.37-2.38.

\textsuperscript{8}Patricia West provides an excellent discussion of the role of historic preservation—specifically at Mount Vernon—in healing sectional discord following the war. See chapter 1, “Inventing a House Undivided, Antebellum Cultural Politics and the Enshrinement of Mount Vernon” in Patricia West, \textit{Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America’s House Museums} (Washington & London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999). I return to this topic in chapter two.
the site. With Congressional support, Virginia Governor William E. Jameson officially conveyed to the United States the property it had previously received from Lewis Washington. Federal procedure at the time placed government-owned historic sites under the supervision of the U.S. War Department. Washington's birthplace thus entered the Federal pantheon of historic sites under the War Department with immediate supervision provided by the Army Corps of Engineers.

As Evarts pushed for additional appropriations to construct a substantial memorial at the site, the Department of State dispatched an engineer to determine exactly what, if anything, remained of Washington's birth house. No records of this work remain, but we do know that it raised the concerns of local residents. Neighbors learned about the War Department's intent to enshrine the old chimney and complained that the chimney was not actually part of the original birth home. Unfazed, the War Department continued with its plans, but the project stalled with no way to deliver building supplies to the remote site. Nearly a decade passed until the Army Corps of Engineers arrived at Wakefield with a new plan for memorialization.

In response to complaints concerning the baroque excess of the original plan, the War Department secured Congressional approval for a new design in 1893 involving the construction of a fifty-foot granite obelisk atop the site of Washington's birth. Because the plan required that a concrete pad be poured to support the obelisk, the War Department revisited the cursory archeological work performed ten years prior. Excavations focusing on the presumed site of Custis's long-lost memorial did reveal the foundations of a building, but nothing as substantial as everyone expected—certainly nothing befitting Washington's grand legacy. Nonetheless, the War Department erected
its monument in 1896 and Washington’s birthplace witnessed a host of early visitors including President Theodore Roosevelt.

Questions about the location of Washington’s birth site subsided until 1923 when a new organization unwittingly resurrected the old controversy. The Wakefield National Memorial Association (WNMA), organized by Northern Neck native Josephine Wheelwright Rust, resolved to construct a replica of Washington’s birth home on the building’s original site. By 1926, the group had raised enough money to purchase seventy acres of land surrounding the Federal holding. Not unlike other ladies associations of the time, the WNMA enlisted considerable support for its project, most notably from U.S. Fine Arts Commissioner Charles Moore and noted Washington family genealogist Charles Hoppin. New York Senator James W. Wadsworth, Jr. and Virginia Representative Schulyer O. Bland introduced legislation in the Senate and House authorizing the WNMA to enact its plan and, in 1926, President Calvin Coolidge approved a bill granting the group permission to “build...a replica of the house in which George Washington was born.”

Despite its goal to build a replica, the WNMA had no idea what the original birth house actually looked like. Nobody did—no records of the building or its appearance existed locally or, as best as anyone could tell, anywhere. Charles Moore worried that the WNMA had pledged itself to do the impossible. He requested that the site be re-excavated and, sure enough, his investigation confirmed the discrepancies between the archeological record and local memory previously discovered by the War Department excavations. Still, Moore’s dig did not locate any additional foundations and thus could not completely rule out that the WNMA had its eyes set upon the wrong site.

---

9 This is the language of the WNMA’s granting legislation, H.R. 10131, 69th Congress.
The War Department, put off by the WNMA’s ingress at Popes Creek, dispatched its own survey team to Wakefield in 1927. The team—led by renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.—declared the WNMA’s plans untenable and cautioned against calling any new structure a “replica” lest visitors believe it to be the actual birth house. Under Rust’s determined leadership, the WNMA balked at Olmsted’s warning and proceeded to draw plans for a replica house. The Secretary of War warned Rust in early 1928 that he intended to proceed with his own commemorative plans at Wakefield, but the WNMA managed to outmaneuver the War Department for Congressional favor. By 1929, the WNMA had all but obtained carte blanche at Wakefield.

At the same time, the WNMA encountered an even more significant obstacle: the sudden economic collapse of 1929. The success of the Wakefield project depended upon raising a substantial purse through public subscription. A year prior, WNMA historian Charles Hoppin had fortuitously managed to interest John D. Rockefeller, Jr. in the project. Rockefeller agreed to purchase 267 acres of land adjacent to the birthplace for transfer to the WNMA pending receipt of public donations equal to the value of his contribution. But raising those funds proved difficult following the stock market crash. Rust sought additional Congressional appropriations to buoy the effort. At the same time, Horace Albright, the newly minted director of the National Park Service (NPS), was looking to expand his own organization by acquiring national historic sites in the eastern states.\(^\text{10}\) Albright contacted Michigan Representative Louis Cramton who successfully opposed appropriation bills proposed on behalf of the WNMA. Cramton argued that only

\(^{10}\) Until then, and since its creation in 1916, the NPS had focused primarily on the preservation of natural resources in the American West.
an organization like the NPS could guarantee the historical authenticity of the WNMA’s project. Congress agreed and required that the WNMA transfer its property to the NPS. President Herbert Hoover officially established the George Washington Birthplace National Monument on January 23, 1930.

The fast approaching two-hundredth anniversary of Washington’s birth provided special motivation for both the NPS and the WNMA to work together toward creating a new commemorative landscape at Washington’s birthplace. The United States George Washington Bicentennial Commission saturated the country with Washingtonia—in part to celebrate his birthday—but also in hopes of cheering a nation hit hard by economic depression. The Commission applauded the WNMA’s patriotic zeal in raising funds through public subscription and the Monument basked in the media glow created by movie crews, press corps, visiting dignitaries, and a highly publicized mail drop by famed aviator Major James Doolittle. All the while, the WNMA’s architect, Edward Donn, worked feverishly to weave various fragments of historical hearsay and local memory into plans for what was supposed to be a replica of Washington’s birth house. No end of tweaking, however, would make his initial plans correspond with the foundations excavated beneath the site of the old Custis marker.

Returning to the drawing board, Donn proposed a new design inspired by a house near Mount Vernon called Gunston Hall, which local legend held to have been designed

11 Cramton already demonstrated interest in historical preservation through his involvement in the restoration of the Robert E. Lee home during the 1920s. See Oculus, “Cultural Landscape Report,” vol. 1, 2-58. Cramton additionally supported Albright’s vision by proposing the “Cramton Bill” that, when signed into law in December 1930, created Colonial National Monument.

12 Karal Ann Marling notes that the Commission’s praise failed to acknowledge the WNMA’s substantial Congressional appropriation. Karal Ann Marling, George Washington Slept Here, Colonial Revivals and American Culture, 1876-1986 (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 348. Marling also describes the stunning variety and, in some cases excess, of the Commission’s Washington fanfare. Today, visitors can see fragments of the streamers tied to packages dropped by Doolittle that Superintendent Phillip Hough attached to his July 1932 monthly report, GEWA.
after the Washington family's home at Popes Creek. The new design also bore a remarkably strong resemblance to Josephine Rust's own childhood home, a building just miles from Washington's birthplace called Twiford. And although the plan far exceeded the size of the excavated foundations, local residents—including descendents of the Washington family—considered the new plans an accurate representation of their collective memory of Washington's birth house. The WNMA approved Donn's plans for the "replica" on October 17, 1927 and set to raising the money necessary to undertake such an ambitious project.

When work on the house finally began in September 1930, Albright volunteered the services of an NPS engineer whom the WNMA set to excavating the site one last time. This would be the last time the foundations would ever be seen as the WNMA's building plans approved destruction of the old foundations to make way for construction of the Memorial House. NPS Landscape Architect Charles Peterson decried the project as "one of the most culpably destructive operations of which I have ever heard...a great archeological crime has been perpetrated." The WNMA had indeed initiated a remarkably destructive construction project. But, unbeknownst to anyone at the time, the WNMA's commitment to a poorly substantiated project unwittingly preserved the actual birth site foundations. As of 1930, however, material evidence of that fortuitous mistake remained buried some fifty feet away from the heart of the controversy.

The Curious Case of Building X

As workers busied themselves about clearing the old foundations from beneath the spot once marked by the old Custis marker, Donn noticed an unusual rise in the ground just south of the site. An exploratory trench dug there revealed a massive U-
shaped brick foundation. Startled by the discovery and concerned that the WNMA might be building on the wrong site, Donn contacted historian Charles Hoppin who dismissed the discovery out of hand. Hoppin was unwilling to "entertain a notion of any other site on any other part of the Wakefield estate, as the birthplace site and house." With that, the WNMA ignored what it termed "Building X" and continued, according to plans, to build their replica Memorial House. The NPS, eager for its new park to open unsullied by controversy, did not intervene.

Contractors relocated the old granite obelisk to the Park's new entrance and constructed the Memorial House in its place using bricks made on site by craftsmen from Colonial Williamsburg. The house complete, the WNMA transferred its property to the Federal government on June 22, 1931. Josephine Rust, who had begun the project and devoted nearly a decade of determined leadership to it, died four days later. Despite Rust's untimely death, the NPS worked in conjunction with the WNMA throughout the following months and, together, they completed the Park's commemorative landscape in time to celebrate George Washington's 200th birthday. The George Washington Birthplace National Monument, born amid a spirit of national celebration, promised to recreate for the country the scene of its most beloved hero's birth. All the while, Building X, which had been conveniently backfilled in advance of the celebration, lurked quietly beneath the soil just feet away.

But murmurings concerning Building X lingered. Eager to settle the controversy, Superintendent Philip Hough—who believed firmly that the Memorial House was appropriately located—initiated a park-wide archeological program in March 1936.

---

14 Hoppin's 24 October 1930 response is cited in Hatch, Popes Creek Plantation, 88.
Excavations at Building X supported exactly the conclusion Hough hoped to dispel. Traces of ash and burnt rubble within the Building X foundations supported the conclusion that Building X was, in fact, Washington’s birth house. Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes called for an investigation to determine exactly how the NPS could have made such a massive mistake. The findings of that investigation, however, mysteriously vanished soon thereafter. All that remains today is a memo that begins, “Conclusion: that the design at Wakefield is not authentic.”

Unsatisfied, Hough proposed another archeological investigation to settle the Building X question. Historian David Rodnick arrived at the site on August 28, 1940 to lead the project. The onset of World War II, however, curtailed budget appropriations and so Rodnick devoted what resources he had to evaluating all of the documents and records previously generated during work at Popes Creek. His “Orientation Report on the George Washington Birthplace National Monument” (1941) argued—much to Hough’s dismay—that, not only was Building X the site of George Washington’s birth, but that both the WNMA and the NPS were responsible for building a bogus replica. World War II eclipsed the Building X debate, but Hough stood firmly behind the

---

16 It is important to note that the NPS became involved with the WNMA’s project at a time when the Federal Government itself was just becoming involved in provocative questions about representation and authenticity. Historian William Stott demonstrates that the New Deal generated an entirely new genre of American expression by paying artists, film makers, and writers to document the American condition in a way that would bolster the country’s faith in itself. Concerning WPA photographs, Stott writes, “the camera is a prime symbol of the thirties’ mind...because the mind aspired to the quality of authenticity, of direct and immediate experience, that the camera captures in all it photographs.” William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 77. With this in mind, perhaps Ickes became particularly anxious concerning the authenticity of the Memorial House because questions of authenticity had become so visibly political in this country during the Depression. Further studies of historical re-creations undertaken during the 1930s should pursue this possibility further. 17 NPS Records 16/25, GEWA contains this memo and testimonials by local residents regarding the location of the original house. 18 Copies of Rodnick’s report are available in several locations including the GEWA Archives and library, the National Archives in College Park, MD, and at the Harpers Ferry Center in Harpers Ferry, WV (HFC). The HFC possesses the most complete Rodnick materials including drafts of the report, addenda, and Rodnick’s own hand-written research notes.
Memorial House’s authenticity. His superiors remained, on paper at least, ambivalent about the Building X controversy. Soon after Hough’s death in 1953, however, an anonymous NPS communication proclaimed that “as it stands we are almost positive that the site of the birth home is…where building “x” is located.”

The Legacy of Building X and the Failure of Radical Signification

Although the NPS now recognizes what it used to call “Building X” as the site of the house in which George Washington was born, the Building X controversy cast a long shadow. Concerns about archeological uncertainty thwarted requests for developmental monies well into the late 1960s. Conflict between the NPS and the WNMA, although less visible and certainly less heated in the years after World War II, persisted throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. The NPS, eager to shift interpretive emphasis from the Memorial House to the historic landscape continually struggled to accommodate the WNMA’s desire to celebrate their primary albeit erroneous contribution. Both groups found a workable solution in 1968 when the Monument opened its “living farm.” For the first time in its history, the Monument managed to shift its interpretive focus away from the Memorial House and toward costumed interpreters who demonstrated everything from candle making to ox-handling. The WNMA, overjoyed to dust off their old Colonial Revival gowns, found new opportunities for on-site participation unmolested by the still lingering specter of Building X.

The Monument’s living history program thrilled and, in fact, drew widespread attention from throughout the NPS as a leader in interpretive innovation. Celebration of the nation’s bicentennial in 1976 fueled the Park’s interpretive vision and witnessed record visitation at Popes Creek. The Park consequently underwent a period of

---

19 Anonymous to Carl Flemer, 16 February 1954, NPS Records 19/25, GEWA.
infrastructural modernization during the late 1970s and appeared ready to extend its success into the 1980s. But the combined impact of national energy crises, a consequent drop in visitation, massive Federal defense spending under President Ronald Reagan, and constant shifts in NPS leadership meant hard times throughout the park system. frontline interpretation waned at the birthplace throughout the 1980s and, despite a brief revival during the early 1990s, has more-or-less ceased. What remains is the eerie silence of an unattended farm interspersed with obsolete exhibits—a veritable interpretive ghost town—at the center of which prominently stands the Memorial House.

In that single building we see writ-large the failed attempt of the Colonial Revival to rewrite history in its own image. The unfinished project of radical signification—of forcing the Memorial House to substitute for Building X—remains awkwardly frozen in time. Visitors have difficulty making sense of the Monument not just because its tour leaders and wayside exhibits are vague, but rather because the semiotic glue bonding Washington’s birth house, its various referents, and the hyper-patriotic cult of Washingtonia has not yet set and, in fact, oozes from the seams. When the WNMA rushed to complete the Memorial House by 1932 it circumvented the usual steps required to create a totalizing simulacrum. It failed, for example, to craft a textual narrative strong enough to control the Memorial House’s unbridled signification. In once case, the WNMA and the NPS argued for over fifteen years about how to word a sign describing the Memorial House and its purpose. In the meantime, the link between the Memorial House and its referent grew irrevocably tenuous without an organizing text to cement the bond. Once the foundations of Building X emerged, nothing—not even reburying
them—could fully reunite the Memorial House with its old referent. It’s a messy place and Americans abhor untidy signification.

The Park’s living history program did create a temporary decoy. Employees in idiosyncratic costumes created such a dense network of dangling signifiers that the Memorial House’s own meaning-making capacity coagulated into a state of arrested development. Again, this approach worked well for a while but as funding for and interest in living history dried up within the NPS during the 1980s, the Memorial House’s semiotic enclosure grew frail. Despite a brief simulative resurgence during the early 1990s, the site continued its spiral into a deep pit of fractured signification. Today, signifier and referent remain divided though textual remnants of pre-1970s interpretation preclude a complete amputation. Change might be on the way. The Park is currently undertaking a substantial revision of its primary planning documents and, if wise, will finally confront the abyss of meaning at Wakefield.

**Objects, Memory, and Public History at Washington’s Birthplace**

To do so successfully, the NPS will have to answer a seemingly simple question: what went wrong at Wakefield, or better yet, why has memorializing George Washington’s birthplace become such a complicated ordeal? The short answer is that the WNMA’s inflated ego and the NPS’s fear of public embarrassment allowed a simple oversight to amass incredible momentum until nobody was willing or really able to take responsibility. This is partly true, but the story of Washington’s birthplace is more accurately—and more interestingly—a story about meaning making. It is a story about how diverse individuals across time and space variously construct the past and the lengths they will go to protect their stake in a particular way of remembering. The story...
is not unique to Washington’s birthplace, but it has unfolded there so slowly that we are allowed a vivid glimpse of its complicated mechanics. The challenge is to frame questions that might reveal more about Washington’s birthplace than a mere conspiracy of agendas?

What follows is my attempt to begin answering what, at first, seems a very simple question: why do old things matter so much? That is, why are Americans so obsessed with historic and historical objects?\(^{20}\) That we are is plainly evident just about anywhere you look. It is possible after all, and not at all uncommon, to encounter an individual who swabs his underarms with Old Spice before venturing forth in his New Beetle to visit a Renaissance Faire or Civil War re-enactment where vending machines sell Classic Coke. Ours is a society bent on surrounding itself with stuff that keeps the past near and I am certainly not the first to notice. In fact, it has become virtually impossible to keep abreast of all the old and new scholarship concerning memory, nostalgia, commemoration, material culture, retro-branding, museum studies, and the list goes on. Even newspapers and magazines churn out the stuff. I read recently about prison inmates convinced that black-and-white striped jumpsuits disadvantage them in the courtroom by invoking negative historical stereotypes.\(^{21}\) Sit in a dentist’s waiting room and you can read articles with titles like “The Nostalgia Boom” and “Tomorrowland Never Dies” in Business Week and Vanity Fair.\(^{22}\)

---

\(^{20}\) The distinction here can be clumsy in general usage, but for my purposes, historic objects are artifacts or—to use another clumsy word—original. An old house is a historic object as is a dinosaur bone or any other archeological resource for that matter. A historical object is one that is contrived to invoke the past. In this group I lump everything from meticulous reproductions to items like retro cars and distressed furniture that loosely signify an imprecise past.


Still, studies of historic objects are so seldom satisfying for the very reason that rarely do they tell us much about objects as such. Let me explain. Beyond our obsession with all things past, I find even more compelling our insatiable desire to touch and be near old things. I am reminded of this every time I visit my friend’s home where a piece of the Berlin Wall sits rather unceremoniously next to his large-screen television. Joe is definitely not German and I am fairly certain he did not participate in the felling of the Wall, yet the ability to touch and hold that particular historic object moves him to keep it near America’s other favorite conduit of historical knowledge, the TV. Americans aren’t just fond of old things, we want to consume them or, perhaps more accurately, allow them to consume us. Despite this rabid impulse to touch, see, and feel the real thing—or a careful reproduction if necessary—rarely do people who write about objects account for its raw physicality; rarely do they explain why we so desire to press our bodies against the past.23

Maybe I shouldn’t complain. It took a long time, after all, for the academy to give objects a fair shake—especially in my home discipline, history. Historians have been notoriously reluctant to think about objects as useful starting points for scholarly investigation. Prompted primarily by intellectual currents stirred by the French *Annales* School of the late nineteenth century, American Anthropologists, sociologists, and an emergent group of scholars interested in folk and vernacular culture set the ball into

---

23 This is beginning to change and we may, in fact, be witnessing the dawn of a new era in object studies. Thinkers working outside the typical object study feeder fields like anthropology and material studies have forced important frame shifts. Bruno Latour, for example, made an important step in this direction by arguing, from the perspective of science studies, that we humans are just another kind of object and not until we understand ourselves as such will we be able to understand modernity for what it is. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). More recently, Bill Brown, who approaches objects from the perspective of literary and film theory, has wondered about the necessity of a thing theory that accounts for the difference or lack thereof between the culturally constructed thing and the physically immediate object. Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” in *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
motion on this side of the Atlantic during the 1950s. Things, they contended, could teach
us important lessons about how and why people do what they do. Moreover, especially
in these Cold War years, old American things reminded the country of its founders'
ingenuity and commitment to republican ideals. Or so we thought. As historians grew
increasingly conversant in the language of objects, and as the discipline slowly realized
that rich white men did not alone make history, objects revealed their stunning
polyvocality. We learned, for instance, that early Americans strived desperately to
perform publicly their desired stations in life by, unsurprisingly, consuming objects.
And, for over two decades now, studies of those same objects and how they were
consumed have revealed exactly how terrifying life could be in early America for anyone
unable to amass the requisite stuff.24

But the price of bringing historians to speed with the importance of historic
objects has been their inability to move beyond understanding objects as anything other

24 Surveying the impact of object studies on the practice of history is a formidable task and requires that we
look not just to material culture studies, but also to the work of historical archeologists and architectural
historians. For summaries of important trends in material culture studies, see Ann Smart Martin and J.
Ritchie Garrison, “Shaping the Field: The Multidisciplinary Perspectives of Material Culture” and Cary
Carson, “Material Culture History: the Scholarship Nobody Knows” in Ann Smart Martin and J. Ritchie
Garrison, eds., American Material Culture: The Shape of the Field (Knoxville: University of Tennessee
Press, 1997); Thomas Schlereth, “Introduction: Cultural History and Material Culture” in Cultural History
and Material Culture: Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museums (Ann Arbor and London: UMI Research
Culture, a Research Guide (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985). The classic introduction to
historical archeology is James Deetz, Invitation to Archaeology (Garden City, NY: The Natural History
Press, 1967). For a more recent discussion of historical archeology, especially with regard to its emphasis
on colonialism and capitalism, see Charles E. Orser, Jr., A Historical Archaeology of the Modern World
come to understand history by looking at buildings is Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach, Common
see Henry Glassie, Vernacular Architecture (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000). For an
excellent collection of essays that demonstrates how all these various methodologies have impacted the
study of every day life in this country prior to the Civil War, see Robert Blair St. George, ed., Material Life
in America, 1600-1860 (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988). Finally, recent work concerning
collecting and collections bear significantly on our understanding of objects. For a brief survey of this
material, see the introduction to Leah Dilworth, ed., Acts of Possession: Collecting in America (New
than commodities. Commodities can certainly be a kind of object, but commodity value is not the only kind of value attributable to objects. In fact, figuring objects as commodities typically denies those objects their fundamental objectness, that is, their materiality. This is an unfortunate side-effect of the otherwise important historical project of making sense of capitalism. As Peter Stallybrass puts it, “the fetishism of the commodity inscribes immateriality as the defining feature of capitalism.”

In other words, thinking about objects as commodities—as bundles of economic and consumer value—prevents us from getting at an object’s material value, its basic objectness. How can we know, for instance, if Americans have always valued proximity value? That is, have we always had an irrepressible urge to get close to old things and to hold them? If so, why? If, as it appears, old things are so important to us and if our desire for them is so markedly physical, then how do we talk about historic and historical objects historically? How do we talk about them in a way that somehow interrogates the meaning of physical encounters between objects and people?

The story of Washington’s birthplace provides an excellent opportunity to do exactly that because it is, in the most basic way, a story about people trying to get their bodies as close as humanly possible to a historic object: George Washington. Wakefield was so important to Custis and the WNMA because it was the very first place that George


Washington interacted with his own physical world. They believed that the landscape at Popes Creek inspired, no matter how subtly, Washington’s storied character. They also believed that by bringing themselves into contact with that special spot, they could bring themselves into contact with the man himself, or at least some spiritual residue of his long vanished physical presence. I contend that this belief in the transitive rule of objects is a cultural artifact of a very long Western tradition of object reverence with identifiable antecedents in medieval Europe. Chapter one explores that tradition and the following chapters reveal how that initial impulse persisted through all later stages of commemoration at Washington’s birthplace.

What intensified the situation at Wakefield—and what makes this story so fascinating today—was the impossibly frustrating inability of anyone to figure out exactly where the birthplace was. Prior to the mid 1930s, nobody could, with any certainty, identify exactly where at Wakefield Washington was born. Nor could anyone find any verifiable traces of his birth house, let alone plans or drawings. So, in lieu of a true object, each succeeding generation of commemorators created their own. After Custis set the process into motion, the U.S. War Department erected what it considered a more appropriate monument. By 1926, the WNMA was prepared to replace the Federal monument with an entirely new object—a replica house—that presumed to approximate

---

27 Although the present account only begins to, I am particularly interested in demonstrating that what historian Alison Landsberg calls “prosthetic memory” is a much older phenomenon than what she and others contend. Landsberg argues that the various crises of representation that unfolded at the turn of the twentieth century enabled individuals to acquire and adopt memories that were not their own. Acquired through various shared experiences of new media, prosthetic memories can promote a positive transnationality. I counter that a close examination of physical encounters between individuals and objects over time (Landsberg is concerned primarily with film and visual culture) reveals a much longer history of prosthetic memory that is more properly prosthetic in its ability to extend individuals into communities of the past through direct interaction with historic and historical objects. Alison Landsberg, Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
the true object as closely as possible. In this way, historical objects can function as place holders for missing historic objects. Each commemorative episode reveals an effort to create an object capable of standing in for the real house. And, as we will see, all of those objects speak to the particular cultural and political exigencies of their times.

The WNMA’s desire to construct a replica of Washington’s birth house—even without adequate evidence—points us toward a second vital function of historical objects; when well contrived, they eventually become historic objects themselves and, in so doing, recast the past in their own image. At Washington’s birthplace, this process began in 1815 with Custis’s visit to Popes Creek. Custis’s marker, although itself imprecisely placed and then moved around over the years, became the object of all subsequent commemorative efforts. Surely someone as intimately linked to Washington as Custis would know best where to find his birth site, right? The War Department and, later, the WNMA certainly thought so. And, as Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig tell us, “forms of presentation that originated in particular historical moments carry on into later periods...[and] the objects’ mere historicity can make them seem valuable and significant.”

Over time, Custis’s marker and stories about its probable location acquired a historicity of their own. Therefore, just like the War Department, the WNMA built its replica house atop the supposed location of Custis’s marker even though the foundations beneath it did not correspond with how they imagined Washington’s birth house.

In other words, the WNMA fashioned a historical object—the Memorial House—that denied the authority of an actual historic object, while still claiming it to be a replica.

---

How could they do this? Answering this question requires that we consider the development of historical method in this country during the twentieth century. Quite simply, historical archeology had not yet mustered enough authority by 1930 to compete with the power of local memory. The sum total of local knowledge and oral tradition concerning the location of Washington’s birth house enshrined within local memory the Custis site as the true site and nothing—especially not a confused scattering of subterranean debris—would convince the WNMA otherwise. And when the WNMA built its house, again relying on local memory as the sure font of historical authority, it did so perfectly confident that even if the Memorial House did not precisely replicate Washington’s birth house brick for brick (the original was probably sided with wood anyway), it nonetheless replicated there the physical proportionality responsible for cultivating republican virtue.

At least, that is what Josephine Wheelwright Rust and the Wakefield ladies meant when they called the Memorial House a replica. Other members of the WNMA were not so certain. As we have seen, Vice President Charles Moore and even the man who designed the memorial House, Edward Donn, had serious qualms about the project. But once the house was constructed, how could they turn their backs, especially now that the NPS had become involved? The involvement of Horace Albright’s NPS raised the WNMA’s stakes in their struggle to exert historical authority at Wakefield. The WNMA predicated its historical authority on its self-proclaimed mastery of local memory. The NPS, however, represented a new trend in the world of museums and historic preservation that reserved historical authority for trained professionals alone. The discovery of Building X and its consequent fallout brought to loggerheads very different
ideas about the value and function of historic and historical objects. As I demonstrate in chapter two, these differences unfolded along gender lines and repeated larger changes manifest throughout the country's public historic sites.

The manner in which the contest for historical authority between the WNMA and the NPS was joined reveals a third significant function of historical objects. Historical objects can themselves be deployed in the contest for historical authority. Just as the WNMA's design and placement of its Memorial House communicated, on behalf of the Association, its mastery of local memory, subsequent efforts to furnish the Memorial House with highly authentic objects marked a new tactic in the contest against the NPS for control of the past at Washington's birthplace. Ironically, the WNMA's investment in authenticity so closely resembled the NPS's own commemorative methodology that the Wakefield ladies unwittingly sacrificed their unique claim to historical authority as a result. My point in the pages that follow, however, is that by paying close attention to the social life of historical objects in any given place over a long period of time, historians can discover in their movement the agendas of their owners. At public historic sites like Washington's birthplace, historical objects are manipulated over time like chess pieces by players eager to assert their particular ways of remembering. Victory belongs to the player whose pieces achieve greatest mnemonic advantage.

That game, we must keep in mind, is played publicly. For that reason, I am concerned to put forward a way of studying objects that helps us understand the history of public history in this country. None of what I am proposing here will sound terribly new to anyone familiar with the expanding field of public history. Others have examined in detail what John Bodnar calls the "memory debate" in this country, that is, how
Americans vie over time to assert their beliefs about history and nationhood through commemorative acts. And a host of scholars including David Lowenthal, Michael Kammen, and more recently in *The Age of Homespun*, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich have written at length about the manner in which historic and historical objects are deployed in the service of national public memory. The various contributors to the story of Washington's birthplace have all played a role in debates about public memory. But I am less interested in identifying sweeping national trends, then in examining how those trends play out at the local level. Therefore, *Birthing Washington* is a micro history of a particular site of public history. It is intended, in part, to answer Thomas Schlereth's call for "more careful research—at the level of the individual history museum—before we can assess how American museums over the past two centuries have depicted American history."31

To that end, however, I must admit to being a newcomer to the field of public history and, as such, am only beginning to understand its possibilities and limitations. For my part, I have written *Birthing Washington* with an eye toward making it both accessible and meaningful to scholars and museum professionals steeped in a variety of fields and disciplines. I worry that too many historians who write about museums do so with the sole purpose of critiquing their ability to tell responsible stories about the past. Keeping museums honest is an important task for academic historians. But we must also recognize that in museums' various interpretive accomplishments and missteps exist

---

important stories about how American memory gets made. Rather than only criticize museums, historians might be better served by also helping them tell their own stories.

Many public history sites have not yet become comfortable with reflexivity. At Washington’s birthplace, for example, a recent discussion concerning the future of interpretation at the Park pivoted around the question of whether or not to interpret the history of commemoration at the site. Should Washington’s birthplace tell the story of Building X to its daily visitors? I think so. Others worry that doing so will obscure the Monument’s commitment to George Washington. This disagreement will persist until both sides come to the bargaining table equally equipped to talk about commemoration and what it means. Ultimately, Birthing Washington seeks to facilitate that discussion and presents my argument in support of pulling back the curtain so that visitors might understand that the stories they are told are always contrived and that, within that contrivance, lie even more remarkable stories about objects, memory, and the creation of a national monument.

The argument unfolds in five acts. Chapter one takes seriously Patricia West’s claim that the function of a house museum is “shaped by the exigencies of the period in which the museum is founded.” In the case of Washington’s birthplace, we can look even further back. George Washington Parke Custis’s placement of the first memorial marker at Washington’s birthplace in 1815 occurred when it did and how it did for very specific reasons and the manner by which he memorialized Washington’s birth has shaped every subsequent interpretive effort at the Monument. I discuss Custis’s commemorative act within the intellectual context of the early republic and reveal how he brought to bear a centuries-old tradition of object fetishism on the shores of Popes Creek.

32 West, Domesticating History, xi.
Chapter two chronicles the years between Custis’s visit to Popes Creek and the creation of the national monument. The Colonial Revival in this country provides the backdrop for my discussion of the WNMA’s rise to power at Wakefield and its collision there with the National Park Service. I argue that the WNMA had always intended the Memorial House to convey a particular story about domesticity and the role of women in Washington’s early life. The NPS, staffed by a new generation of professional male public historians, did not share nor even recognize the WNMA’s commemorative intent and thus initiated an uneasy relationship between two organizations with very different aims.

Chapter three considers the defining event in the history of Washington’s birthplace. The discovery, excavation, and backfilling of the actual foundations of the Washington house—what became known as Building X—set into motion a remarkably complicated and long-lasting argument about the nature of authenticity and meaning in historical representation. We will see how debate concerning Building X masked even larger concerns about historical authority as the WNMA and NPS squared off against one another. To this end, I discuss a remarkable fifteen-year long argument between the two organizations about how to word a simple sign explaining to visitors what exactly the Memorial House represented. Chapter four continues to follow the Building X story and looks closely at how its various participants manipulated different kinds of objects to consolidate power at Washington’s birthplace. The WNMA, by attracting a new powerful leader, hoped to maintain its authority in decisions regarding the furnishing of the Memorial House. The strategy worked at first, but eventually undercut the WNMA’s
claims to authority by rendering its brand of authenticity virtually indistinguishable from the NPS's.

Failure to fully reconcile the Building X fiasco left Washington's birthplace in a state of interpretive limbo during the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, the Park struggled to accommodate racial difference during these years, frequently doing so by purposefully excluding black visitors. Although a national park, Washington's birthplace promoted racial discord at a time when the Federal government worked hard to convince its Cold War foes that American democracy was color blind. As we will see in chapter five, however, it was precisely the Park's prejudice that set it on a path toward interpretive innovation. By putting an ex-slave to work in its demonstration tobacco and cotton crops during the 1930s, the Monument experimented very early on with the techniques of what we now call living history. And it was living history, during the late 1960s, which enabled the Park for the first time in its history to escape the shadow of Building X.

Since the 1980s, however, the decline of living history at Washington's birthplace has coincided with a resurfacing of old concerns about authenticity and historical meaning. I conclude by arguing that despite years of trying, Washington's birthplace cannot solve its most basic interpretive dilemmas for the very reason that Custis's imprint, no matter how subtle, continues to exert considerable force. The NPS's well intentioned though mis-directed attempts to solve what it perceives to be problems of interpretation reveal volumes about the difficulties manifest in creating and presenting responsible public history.
CHAPTER I

THE FIRST STONE

The Federal Government first focused its commemorative gaze on Washington’s birthplace in 1879. Four decades later, the Wakefield National Memorial Association (WNMA) initiated a campaign that raised the site to national prominence. But, how and why did anyone ever get the idea to commemorate the site in the first place? After all, Washington spent barely three years of his infancy there and Popes Creek hardly figured in his military or political careers. The answer lies in a story that properly begins with a flamboyant character named George Washington Parke Custis. George and Martha Washington adopted Custis after the boy’s father, John Park Custis—Martha’s son by her first marriage and George’s aide-de-camp at the Battle of Yorktown—died in 1781. Custis was only six months old when he moved to Mount Vernon where, for over two decades, he enjoyed George and Martha’s deep affections and even deeper pockets. Correspondence between the two Georges reveals the younger’s taste for aristocratic leisure during his school years at the College of New Jersey (Princeton University since 1896). Frequently admonished to devote more time to studies and less to women and
horse racing, young George traded in his old ways upon the elder's death in 1799 and undertook a new career as unofficial guardian of Washington's legacy (figure 2).\(^1\)

From the halls of his home at Arlington, Virginia—built between 1802 and 1818 on and with his inheritance—Custis, when not speculating in sheep farms, devoted his remaining fifty-eight years to celebrating the deeds and accomplishments of his famous benefactor.\(^2\) Historian Karal Ann Marling describes Custis as "a garrulous eccentric who...dabbled in historical drama" and "was even known to dress up in his grandpa's Annapolis uniform once in a while."\(^3\) He filled his home with Washington memorabilia, painted large murals of his famous grandfather in battle, wrote plays and essays concerning historical events, and hosted annual Fourth of July sheep shearings that attracted thousands of visitors for whom he solemnly erected Washington's battle-worn camp tent. Given to dramatic oratory—sometimes by request—Custis even occasionally donned his benefactor's epaulets for added effect.\(^4\)

---

\(^1\) Despite his involvement with some of the most studied families in U.S. history, George Washington Parke Custis has yet to garner a book-length biographical study. I cobble this account together from a variety of sources including an account of a visit to Custis's home at Arlington by Benson J. Lossing, "Arlington House, the Seat of G.W.P. Custis, Esq.," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 7 (1853): 435-36. Custis's Arlington house, which later passed to Custis's son-in-law, Robert E. Lee, is owned and operated by the National Park Service which maintains a park website containing biographical information regarding Custis. See National Park Service, "George Washington Parke Custis," www.nps.gov/arho/tour/history/bios/gwpcustis.html (accessed April 28, 2006).

\(^2\) Custis married Mary Lee Fitzhugh in 1804. The marriage of their only surviving daughter to Robert E. Lee reflected the long-standing relationship between the Washington and Lee families whose hereditary home places—Wakefield and Stratford Hall respectively—stood within only a few miles of each other in Westmoreland County, Virginia. Coincidentally, Custis's daughter married a young man named Robert E. Lee who, before earning widespread notoriety during the American Civil War, spent considerable time managing his father-in-law's estate. Lee inherited the Arlington house following Custis's death in 1857 and inadvertently became the *de facto* curator of perhaps the first unofficial museum devoted to the life of George Washington. His brief career in public history ended, however, when the United States War Department occupied the Custis *cum* Lee house in 1861. That event marked the beginning of government involvement in historic preservation in this country and ultimately set into motion a series of events that would raise Custis's minor memorialization at Washington's birthplace to national prominence during the late 1920s.


\(^4\) Custis encouraged the public to visit his property so that they could celebrate George Washington in the presence of his objects. He went so far as to build a public wharf, dining hall, and other facilities to
Custis’s penchant for Washingtonia, historical tableau, and battle camp reenactments all suggest the sort of histrionics that today we most readily associate with Civil War reenactments or Renaissance fairs. Indeed, Custis’s own account of his commemorative work at Washington’s birthplace confirms this impression. Sometime during June 1815 or 1816, Custis sailed for Popes Creek aboard his private topsail schooner, the Lady of the Lake. He brought two friends along. William Grymes claimed no familial relation to Washington although his father had distinguished himself among Washington’s famous “life guard” unit. Samuel Lewis was Washington’s nephew. His father earned some notoriety through his affiliation with Colonel George Baylor’s Virginia cavalry. Even the Lady’s captain claimed ancestry to a soldier wounded at the battle of Guilford Courthouse.5

5 There are several accounts of Custis’s trip to Popes Creek though all were likely written or inspired by Custis himself. See “A Stone Is Laid” in the Alexandria Gazette, 1 June 1816; reprinted verbatim in the Richmond Virginia Argus, 8 June 1816; and the Richmond Enquire, 12 June 1816. Custis described the event in greater detail in a 14 April 1851 letter to the editor of the Alexandria Gazette. See G.W.P. Custis, Recollection and Private Memoirs of Washington, by his adopted son, George Washington Parke Custis, with a memoir of the author, by his daughter; and illustrative and explanatory notes by Benson J. Lossing (Philadelphia: William Flint, 1895). I rely on this account for my description of Custis’s visit to Popes Creek. It is worth pointing out that, in the 1851 letter, Custis recalled his visit occurring in June 1815, not in June 1816 when the earlier account of his visit appeared in local newspapers. Custis repeated the June 1815 date in a virtually identical account written on 21 August 1851 for Benson J. Lossing. See Lossing, The Pictorial Fieldbook of the Revolution or, Illustration, by Pen and Pencil, of the History, Biography, Scenery, Relics, and Traditions of the War for Independence vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1859), 218, fn. 1. Hatch investigates these various accounts in Popes Creek Plantation, but considers them only with regard to what they reveal about the physical landscape surrounding Washington’s birthplace. The account reveals little about the precise spot of Washington’s birth and for this reason has frustrated NPS planners over the years.
The four men set anchor in the Potomac River just north of the entrance to Popes Creek and hefted a freestone slab into the vessel’s tender. Custis had only a vague idea of where to find Washington’s birthplace but, as luck would have it, he and the landing party happened upon the Washington family’s plantation overseer who was fishing just inside the mouth of Popes Creek. They followed the man a half-mile south and put ashore along the creek’s western bank. With slab in tow, Custis and friends pushed up a steep bank through high grass and emerged atop a gentle hill beyond which fruit trees and fig bushes grew amid the scattered bricks of an ancient chimney. The men solemnly fashioned a makeshift pedestal of the fallen brick and “desirous of making the ceremonial [sic] of depositing the stone as imposing as circumstances would permit, we enveloped it in the ‘star-spangled banner’ of our county, and it was borne to its resting-place in the arms of the descendants of four revolutionary patriots and soldiers.” Engraved in anticipation of this moment, the stone’s inscription read:

Here
The 11th of February, 1732, (Old Style,)
GEORGE WASHINGTON
Was Born.6

Custis and his crew returned to the Lady of the Lake, struck its colors, fired a cannon salute, and raised sail amid the lingering smoke (figure 3).

Birthplaces, Monuments, and Memory in the Early Republic

Custis’s trip to Popes Creek marked an important moment in the history of American memory. Commemoration of any kind was uncommon in this country prior to the 1820s. Marking a birthplace, however, was unheard of and Custis’s trip to Popes Creek likely marks the first time it had been done in any formal way in this country.

Although death place or, more commonly, burial place memorialization has enjoyed a long history in the western world, remembering birthplaces is a markedly modern phenomenon. Europeans first became interested in famous birthplaces during the seventeenth century with the rise of literary tourism. Literary historian Aaron Santesso argues that new ideas about power, authority, and visibility reconfigured the relationship between author and reader in such a way as to generate esteem for and curiosity in the birthplaces of great writers. Various mid-century odes thus memorialized in verse the birthplaces of classical poets like Virgil, Ovid, and Catullus. Seventeenth-century travel guides also referenced famous birthplaces. Wenceslas Hollar's *Long View of London* (1647), for example, directed well-heeled travelers to Edmund Spenser's birthplace. Over time, birthplaces appeared more frequently in tourist itineraries thus pointing to an early instance of what today we might call heritage tourism.

In British North America, where literary landmarks had yet to be established, Europeans remembered a very different kind of birthplace. Credit for having the first widely remembered birth on this side of the Atlantic likely goes to Virginia Dare who, born at the ill-fated Roanoke Colony in 1587, was memorialized—in lore and legend if not in statues and plaques—as the first English child born in the New World. Even though her birthplace was not formally commemorated until 1896, its preservation in popular memory for nearly three centuries is remarkable and speaks to the distinctive

---

9 My thanks to Harold S. Forsythe, Gotlieb Fellow at the New York University School of Law for bringing Virginia Dare to my attention. Dare's birthplace was memorialized in 1896 when the Roanoke Island Memorial Association erected a commemorative stone there. The National Park Service preserves this site and the memorial at Fort Raleigh National Historical Site in North Carolina. The park was established on April 5, 1941.
commemorative value of famous birthplaces. Birthplace memorials always connote a necessary relationship between a person and a place.\textsuperscript{10} We remember Dare because her birth occurred in a place where starvation, disease, and cultural crisis rendered any birth an extraordinary event. The connoted relationship between person and place itself connotes a larger narrative that, by merit of being associated with a birthplace—a point of origin—implies change over time, usually for the better, and always in a way that invokes the past. Dare’s birth resonates historically because, as commemorated, it signifies the success of European colonization.\textsuperscript{11} The commemorative value of a birthplace thus rests in its capacity to simultaneously signify a person, a place, and a story about the past that involves both.

The kind of historical discourse needed to harness a birthplace’s triadic sign function did not mature in this country, however, until the latter half of the nineteenth century and famous birthplaces like Dare’s remained uncommemorated until then. Early Americans harbored an uneasy and often conflicted relationship with their own past. Historian Michael Kammen argues that two hundred years of European-American anti-

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{10} Birthplaces, unlike burial sites, simultaneously commemorate a famous person and the location of that person’s birth. The location of a burial site implies less about the deceased than it does about the circumstances of death, \textit{e.g.} died in poverty, died a sinner, died far from home. In some notable cases, specific sites of death are remembered and even memorialized though usually only when associated with a particularly violent or symbolic death. Abraham Lincoln’s death, for instance, is irrevocably tied to Ford’s Theatre; Jean Paul Marat will forever be recalled slumped over in a bathtub; and even the most sheltered American is daily bludgeoned with images of Christ’s ordeal on a cross. I am thinking here specifically of roadside crosses that proliferate along interstates and highways. For a fascinating discussion of this variety of public expressions of religiosity, see Timothy K. Beal, \textit{Roadside Religion. In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith} (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).

\textsuperscript{11} The phrase “as commemorated” is important and suggests agency. Dare’s birthplace might just as well be interpreted as an important step toward expansion of forced labor throughout the Atlantic World. It could also be tied to the ongoing demise of indigenous coastal peoples. Virginia Dare’s birth is remembered as a success story only because those people who passed down that story and, later, those who erected a memorial to her, considered colonization a virtuous enterprise. It is perhaps a truism these days that monuments and memorials tell us more about their makers than their honorees. It bears repeating however that individuals and groups who commemorate birthplaces do so for very specific reasons and deploy no end of interpretive messages to ensure that their sites signify similarly across experiential difference. Those messages provide insight into the world of ideas occupied by their authors.
\end{footnotesize}
traditionalism—both religious and secular—resulted from a diverse population uninterested in the sort of tradition it had unburdened itself of by first emigrating to the New World and, later, by fighting in the American Revolution. The Revolutionary experience further posited backward looking as an affront to the legacy of those leaders who distinguished themselves precisely by shedding the weight of an oppressive heritage. And, over time, what had been patriotic in 1776 could well be considered criminal in antebellum America. The question of slavery most obviously plagued the collective conscience. Despite various mythologies, not all Americans reflected fondly on Revolutionary politics. Judge Beverly Tucker observed in 1839 that “a man who now acted like Washington would no longer be a patriot but a tyrant.” Consequently, the Revolutionary generation erected very few monuments to itself, neglected its significant historic sites, and reserved more-or-less all of its hero worship for one man, George Washington.

What monuments were built during the first two decades of the nineteenth century conveyed this sense of commemorative reluctance in their form and presentation. A commemorative column designed by Charles Bulfinch and erected atop Boston’s Beacon Hill in 1790 was removed only twenty years later to improve the view outside of

12 Kammen, Mystic Chords of Memory, 41-42.
13 In other respects, the impulse to glorify the leaders of the Revolutionary generation remained strong during the first decades of the nineteenth century, in part because—though many had died—the longevity of men like John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Monroe who lived well into the 1820s suggested something of the immortal.
14 These are not Beverly’s words, but rather his sentiment paraphrased by David Lowenthal in The Past is a Foreign Country (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 119-120. Lowenthal refers to Beverly’s original words in “A discourse on the genius of the federative system of the United States” (1839). Lowenthal provides an insightful discussion of the early republic’s mixed feelings about the legacy of the revolutionary generation.
15 For a discussion of how this indifference played out in Boston following the war, see Alfred F. Young, The Shoemaker and the Tea Party, Memory and the American Revolution (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), especially chapter 3. Backlash against exactly this kind of sentiment, which solidified into a hearty distaste for all thing past by mid-century, eventually spawned the preservative ethic responsible for Mount Vernon’s restoration and, later, the WNMA’s work at Popes Creek.
Boston's State House. Moreover, the monument had always been difficult to reach and its four commemorative inscriptions read like a mere "catalog of words."\textsuperscript{16} Still standing today, the George Washington monument in Baltimore's Mount Vernon neighborhood—begun the same year Custis visited Popes Creek—repeated the same stoic solemnity. Two obelisks, one erected at Bunker Hill in 1825 and the other at Fort Griswold in Groton, Connecticut in 1826, also traded evocative inscriptions and ornamentation for the quiet anonymity then considered more appropriate in a democratic republic of supposed equals.\textsuperscript{17} These monuments implied that places are distinguished by the great events and heroic people associated with them.

In this light, Custis's birthplace marker was remarkably unique for its time and, in both connotation and form, constituted a markedly new kind of memorial. By memorializing Washington's birthplace, Custis managed to invert the conventional commemorative message. Rather than suggesting that people make the place, Custis's monument implied that place makes the people. This was a very new idea in 1815. Not until the late eighteenth century had early life experiences come to be associated with adult character. Previously, life—not unlike history itself—was often portrayed as the experience of disparate moments without causation. Eighteenth-century autobiographies and novels, for instance, portray individuals who "stay the same over time; events do not affect a malleable consciousness, but simply figure as fortuitous moments in careers unmarked by introspective connections with previous stages in life."\textsuperscript{18} This changed, however, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Historian David Lowenthal argues that, by the turn of the nineteenth century, readers began to "view life

\textsuperscript{16} Young, \textit{The Shoemaker and the Tea Party}, 113-16.
\textsuperscript{17} Kammen, \textit{Mystic Chords of Memory}, 19.
\textsuperscript{18} Lowenthal, \textit{The Past is a Foreign Country}, 198.
as an interconnected narrative; within a few decades the relation of the sense of the past to personal memory became part of the mental equipment and expectations at least of the educated.”

Custis’s marker put that “mental equipment” to work at Popes Creek by implying that Washington was who he was in part because he first experienced life amid the environmental particularities of Westmoreland County, Virginia. His meaning was not lost on the public. Consider the following passage from an 1836 biography of George Washington written for children:

The house in which Washington was born stood about half a mile from the junction of Pope’s Creek with the Potomac...A few scanty relics alone remain to mark the spot which will ever be sacred in the eyes of posterity...The spot is of the deepest interest, not only from its associations, but its natural beauties. Let my young readers bear in mind that it was not in a palace, in the midst of the splendours of royalty, that a child was born, with whose first breath the future destinies of millions of the human race were to be inseparably associated, and whose virtues were to redeem his country from a long-continued vassalage. It was in the house of a private man, like that they themselves inhabit, he first saw the light; and it was by the aid alone of such advantages as are within the reach of them all, that he qualified himself, not only to become the future father of his country, but to exhibit to the world one of the purest models of private excellence, that the history of nations presents to the imitation of mankind.


20 The link between person and place is not unique to American commemoration. Aaron Santesso describes similar interpretive messages at Hill Top Farm where Beatrix Potter once lived and where visitors witness “the preservation of her source of literary inspiration.” Stratford “is a physical and occasionally architectural articulation of an argument about William Shakespeare: he was a humble man inspired by nature. Santesso, “The Birth of the Birthplace,” 387-88. The particularities of the American landscape have, however, been put forth at various times in support of ideas about American exceptionalism. For classic studies of how the pastoral ideal, the notion of an open West, and changing attitudes toward wilderness have functioned in this regard, see Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden, Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land, The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1950); and Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

The author associates Washington's greatness with the character of his birthplace and thus implies to his young readers that they too can grow up to be like Washington. Custis was not honoring just a historic person or just a historic event, but rather both through the lens of a single place. In this case, that place included a remote corner of Virginia's Northern Neck befitting the birth of an American Cincinnatus.  

The intellectual motivations underlying Custis's choice to commemorate George Washington's birth at Popes Creek can be attributed to the availability of new ideas about place and identity. But his account of the laying of the first stone, wrapped as it was within the "'star-spangled banner' of our county," also reveals a patriotic impulse spawned by the War of 1812. Bullied by impressments on the high seas and economically hobbled by an influx of cheap consumer goods, Americans once again took up arms against Great Britain by invading Canada in 1812. The foray north was a strategic disaster and U.S. forces suffered dramatic losses. The situation worsened when Britain, enjoying a temporary respite from the Napoleonic Wars in 1814, turned its full might toward reconquering its old colonies. British invaders marched into Washington, D.C. and ravaged the capital city leaving nearly all of its government buildings—including the White House—in ashes. This was a war of symbols and Americans [is] designed for the use of their children." The allusions to republican motherhood—see Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic, Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997)—are clear here and raise yet another peculiarity about Custis's memorial at Popes Creek: wouldn't the marking of Washington's birthplace be considered in 1815 more properly the task of women? The Mount Vernon Ladies' work, which began in 1855 and created a template for other patriotic ladies associations well into the twentieth century, demonstrates the persistence of a kind of late republican motherhood. It is possible that Custis did not further publicize his visit to Popes Creek because he was aware that he was acting beyond the proper confines of his gendered sphere.  

Westmoreland County is occasionally referred to as the "Athens of Virginia." It is unclear for how long this nickname has been in circulation although Lossing described its origins in 1859: "This name has been given to Westmoreland on account of the great number of men, distinguished in our annals, who were born there. Washington; the two Lees, who signed the Declaration of Independence; the brothers of Richard Henry Lee (Thomas, Francis, and Arthur); General Henry Lee; Judge Bushrod Washington, and President Monroe, were all born in that county." See Lossing, *The Pictorial Fieldbook of the Revolution*, 217, n. 2.
responded to guerilla semiotics long before September 11, 2001. As the British invading force turned its sights toward Baltimore, volunteers amassed to repel the invasion. Citizen soldiers and wealthy merchants pooled their resources at Fort McHenry in Baltimore Harbor and successfully defended the city from what, at that time, was one of the most aggressive artillery volleys to date. By 1815, the United States had emerged victorious in the first full test of the country’s ability to hold its own on a world stage.

But the War of 1812 served ends beyond national defense. Historian Steven Watts demonstrates in The Republic Reborn (1987) that the impulse to rejoin America’s old foe simultaneously grew out of and created new models for citizenship by shifting the old rhetoric of republican virtue toward a new “liberal creed of self-made success and competitive materialism.”

The United States had witnessed remarkable expansion following the Revolution in both territory and technology and even staunch Republicans like Thomas Jefferson found themselves flirting with the promise of strong federal government during the first decade of nationhood. Americans—especially well-off Americans seeking more power and wealth—promoted a new grammar of citizenship that reconciled the previously uncomfortable relationship between money and morality. Among the most aggressive prophets of self-made success was Mason Locke Weems, better known to us as Parson Weems. Watts argues that Weems’ Life of Washington (1800) read like “a success manual for young Americans.” Washington’s humble start in rural Virginia, according to Weems, demonstrated that hard work and industry could bring any young man to power and wealth.

---

24 Watts, The Republic Reborn, 144.
The years following American victory in the War of 1812 witnessed an explosion of popular patriotic symbols of similar rhetorical disposition. Francis Scott Key's famous poem *cum* national anthem, Andrew Jackson's victory at New Orleans, and Dolly Madison's rescue of Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington all invoked the virtues of hard work and determination and, to this day, remain part of the nation's popular iconography. The War of 1812 thus conjured pride in a collective national identity by creating a new pantheon of popular American symbols. And keeping with the example set by Weems, Custis contributed his own commemorative paean to the power of humble origins. Having volunteered in the defense of Washington during the 1814 attack, Custis carried fresh memories of the capitol city ablaze (a city named after his adopted father) with him to Popes Creek. Victory in that war constituted a figurative national rebirth and it is not surprising within that celebratory climate that Custis found cause to visit Washington's birthplace.

This new regime of postwar patriotic symbols filled the gaps created by the slow decay of an old set of American icons. Washington was only one of many Revolutionary leaders then succumbing to old age. Ben Franklin, that boisterous symbol of American industry, died in 1790. Sam Adams died in 1803 bitterly opposed to the new centralized government. Richard Henry Lee, who proposed the resolution calling for independence, and Thomas Paine who popularized the cause, died in 1794 and 1809 respectively. All the while, Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo—the same year Custis erected his monument—

---

25 The war's role in consolidating national identity is easily overstated; the United States—from its colonial beginnings to the present day—boasts a fascinating diversity of regional and micro-identities. The war did, however, give life to a number of patriotic symbols that remain current in popular political discourse. To this end, see Walter R. Borneman, *1812, The War That Forged a Nation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004). For a more critical consideration of the war, see Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812, A Forgotten Conflict* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).
reminded the new nation of the dangers inherent in democratic passions run amok. To those Americans who longed for the old symbolic order, for the old days of republican virtue, it certainly must have seemed as if the pillars of that era might be crumbling. In this light, Custis’s memorial simultaneously celebrated humble beginnings and the promise of hard work while hearkening back to what must have increasingly seemed like a bygone era. His choice of Samuel Lewis and William Grymes to accompany him aboard the Lady of the Lake certainly seems to reveal nostalgia for a time when white men derived fame and glory through affiliation with high causes and great deeds.

**Historical Objects and the Romantic Imagination**

But attributing Custis’s motivations to nostalgia may seem odd given the early republic’s general disinterest in commemorating the past.\(^{26}\) Custis’s account—specifically the name of his schooner—points us toward a more likely explanation. Scottish author and poet Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) published a vastly popular poem in 1810 titled *Lady of the Lake*. Though important for our story, Custis’s evident admiration of Scott’s writing is not surprising. Scott, well known for novels including *Ivanhoe* (1819) and *Rob Roy* (1817), attracted a large audience throughout Europe and the United States during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.\(^{27}\) Literary historians

---

\(^{26}\) In fact, a striking anachronism of the two decades following the Revolution was its increasing preoccupation with accurate documentation of the past. Some scholars attribute this phenomenon to the modernization of historical method heralded by German historian Leopold Von Ranke during the early nineteenth century. It is true that Ranke’s commitment to passionate objectivity changed the way we do history and George Bancroft, generally considered the first modern American historian, took his cues accordingly. Neither Ranke nor Bancroft had been active by 1815 though and so we must look for another explanation. It is important to note, however, that from the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth, art museums, for example, increasingly grouped paintings by periods and schools rather than by theme and appearance. Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), 36.

\(^{27}\) In the United States, Scott’s work found particular success among a small though increasingly powerful plantation aristocracy eager to find historical precedents for its own particular brand of chivalric feudalism. Custis, a southern plantation owner himself, evidently shared the rich South’s penchant for Sir Walter Scott. Custis honored George Washington and although Americans of all stripes felt some claim on *the*...
generally agree that his work marked an important shift in the literary representation of a historical past.\textsuperscript{28} Although fictional and historical narrative had shared a more-or-less conjoined history in classical epics, an increasing concern for the authenticity of historical sources during the late sixteenth century set the two on separate paths. Early modern European literature thus distinguished between histories and romances, granting factual credence to the former and reserving the latter for poetic license. Scott, a figurehead of late eighteenth-century Romanticism, reunited both narrative threads so that, as Thomas Carlyle remarked in 1838, “bygone ages [seemed] filled by living men...not by protocols, state-papers, controversies and abstractions.”\textsuperscript{29} Scott’s early historical fiction remains in currency today thus testifying to his success and impact.

He achieved that success by making the past exciting and accessible to a large reading public. Scott spun long rambling yarns about a distant Anglo-Saxon past with rich historical detail and vibrant tableau. His stories conveyed the weight of epic

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item[28] I am not a literary historian and therefore will not attempt a lengthy consideration of Scott’s work or relevant scholarship. However, George G. Dekker’s recent work on Scott explains Scott’s significance and provides a thoughtful discussion on the relationship between Scott’s portrayal of the historical past and the development of literary tourism in Europe and beyond. See Dekker, \textit{The Fictions of Romantic Tourism, Radcliffe, Scott, and Mary Shelley} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). Although it does not dwell on Scott at length, Robert Mayer’s discussion of the early history of the English novel provides the context necessary to understand Scott’s arrival on the literary scene as marking a resumption of the dialogue between fictional and historical discourse. See Mayer, \textit{History and the Early English Novel, Matters of Fact from Bacon to Defoe} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For an excellent non-Scott specific discussion of the literary history of history, see Ian Watt, \textit{The Rise of the Novel} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965). For specifics concerning Scott’s body of work I consulted Robin Mayhead, \textit{Walter Scott} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973). For a very early discussion of Scott’s fictive manipulation of historical narrative, see Albert S.G. Canning, \textit{History in Scott’s Novels, a Literary Sketch} (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1905).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
historical events through the lens of individuals, real humans who seemed not entirely unlike their readers. More important to our story, Scott conjured immediacy in his novels by way of historical objects. The founder of the Musee de Cluny, Alexandre du Sommerard, claimed in 1838 that “ardour for the Middle Ages has spread from the prestige of history to the material objects which contributed so greatly to the inspiration of [Scott,] a zealous collector in this genre.” Sommerard additionally suggested that a “methodical collection” of historical objects might enhance historical research. Sommerard’s assertion, according to historian Stephan Bann, suggests that Scott successfully encouraged a “kind of priority of the historical object over the historical text” in intellectual circles. Scott expressed this sentiment himself by calling Melrose Abbey—a Scottish abbey restored under Scott’s direction in 1822—a “glorious old pile...a famous place of antiquarian plunder. There are such rich bits of old-time sculpture for the architect, and old-time story for the poet. There is as rare picking in it as in a Stilton cheese, and in the same taste—the mouldier the better.”

Custis claimed his own “glorious old pile” at Popes Creek. Custis’s monument was unique in 1815 because it commemorated the seeming detritus of history. Unlike other memorials that attempted to assert their artifice atop the surrounding landscape—the Washington monument in Baltimore again serves as an excellent example—Custis’s memorial glorified the extant. Rather than build a monolith, Custis’s freestone marker derived its commemorative gusto from the very brick-a-brac ruins it rested on. I use

30 He managed this in part through literary slight of hand—Scott’s characters speak in modern English and have impossibly comprehensive knowledge of the historical dramas enveloping them. See Georg Lukacs, The Historical Novel (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 44. Also see Lowenthal, The Past is a Foreign Country, 225-26.
32 Scott’s quote appears in Washington Irving, Abbotsford and Newstead Abbey (1835) and is cited in Lowenthal, The Past is a Foreign Country, 43.
“ruin” purposefully here because although the United States already possessed ruins bespeaking an ancient past—consider the ancient earth mounds scattered throughout the Ohio and Mississippi River Valleys—\(^{33}\) it lacked the kind of ruins that Anglo-Americans could deploy in the service of their own ethnocentric settlement narrative. It lacked what Scott described in *Lady of the Lake* as the “Crags, knolls, and mounds, confusedly hurl’d; The fragments of an earlier world.”\(^{34}\) The new country lacked a suitably ancient tribute to Washington’s legacy and so Custis cultivated a ruin at Popes Creek.

Custis’s commemorative impulse had everything to do with the same fascination with historical objects fostered by Scott’s literary Romanticism. He surrounded himself with relics from Washington’s life and military campaigns. A visitor to Custis’s Arlington home in 1853 recalled beholding a host of Washington “relics”: Washington’s silver dinner service, furniture from Mount Vernon, the bed Washington died in, his camp chest, and most famously, Washington’s wartime camp tent.\(^{35}\) Custis similarly surrounded himself with portraits of his esteemed family. He tried his own hand at painting elaborate historical panoramas depicting his famous grandfather in battle.

Custis’s daughter took pains to put her father’s ‘talents’ in a positive light:

One of the principal amusements of Mr. Custis’s later years, was painting revolutionary battle-scenes in which Washington participated. Upon these he worked with the greatest enthusiasm. Considering the circumstances under which they were produced—painted without being first composed or drawn in outline, by an entirely self-taught hand more than threescore and ten years old—they are remarkable. In general conception and grouping, they are spirited and original. He was not disposed to devote the time and labor requisite to their careful execution, and therefore, as works of art merely, they have but little merit. *Their* 

\(^{33}\) Thomas Jefferson was well aware of what he called “barrows” and described excavating one in “Query XI” of his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781).

\(^{34}\) Scott, *Lady of the Lake* (1810), Canto I, sect. xiv.

\(^{35}\) Lossing, “Arlington House,” 439-44.
chief value lies in their truthfulness to history in the delineation of events, incidents, and costumes [emphasis added].

In this last sentence we witness the influence of Sir Walter Scott: history defined as the delineation of events, incidents, and costumes. It is this move beyond facts and figures to the details of lived historical reality that marks the beginning of a particular kind of popular historical sensibility in this country wherein objects link readers, viewers, collectors, and users to the past.

A combination of postwar patriotism and Scott's literary romanticism created an intellectual context ripe for the cultivation of—what I think we can call in Custis's case—object fetishism. Some scholars argue that the persistence of object fetishism in modern society is a prehistoric holdover from a time when animistic belief systems projected the life force of dead people and animals onto inanimate objects. This line of argument suggests that the emotive residue of a long-vanished belief system leaves us in a "more or less perpetual attempt to surround [ourselves] with magically potent objects." A whole body of scholarship concerning memory, invented traditions, and tourism also implies that modern attitudes about objects and history have very old origins. Rarely, however, do these studies explain in any satisfying way how or why those old ideas about objects survived the ages. It is a long leap from cavemen to capitalism and if a continuous thread

---

36 Custis, Recollection, 68.
37 Custis was certainly not alone and the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed a large-scale popularization and democratization of what Judith Pascoe calls romantic collecting, the purposeful acquisition of objects toward the end of shaping one's own identity in ways informed by romantic literature of the time. See Judith Pascoe, The Hummingbird Cabinet, A Rare and Curious History of Romantic Collectors (Cornell University Press, 2005).
of object fetishism indeed links those two points, the implications for understanding why we humans think about objects and the past in the way we do would be considerable.39

We have seen how George Washington Parke Custis purposefully and systematically organized hosts of historic objects in ways he hoped would convey important meanings about George Washington. To the casual observer, Custis's objects functioned like modern relics by putting their beholders into virtual contact with the great man himself. But to what extent were Custis's objects actually relics, in the most literal sense of the word? It has become commonplace for anthropologists, public historians, museum curators, and others to assert that average people experience a kind of communion with the past through interaction with historical objects. But, how did we learn to commune with the past through objects in the first place? A host of scholarship indirectly implies that the answer lies in the link between modern tourism and the medieval pilgrimage.40 Even the popular press posits this argument. Self-proclaimed "social observer" Sarah Vowell's latest book, Assassination Vacation (2005), chronicles the author's meandering journey among sites of presidential assassinations. She links

39 So many material culture studies consider things as exclusively delineating value—whether it be value predicated on cash, fashion, or both—that it is rare to find a study that really confronts the material realities of human object interactions over time. Moreover, material culture studies as practiced today grew out of the 1970s and 1980s concern with late stage New Social History and, as such, seeks to understand how class and identity manifest in objects while taking for granted the impulse to own, collect, and preserve. Broader examination, I contend, reveals that what we so often consider a natural inclination toward what Jules Prown calls "affective apprehension of historical objects" was systematically and purposefully cultivated over millennia.

“medieval pilgrimage routes” with “the beginnings of the modern tourism industry” and claims that,

You can draw a more or less straight line from a Dark Ages peasant blistering his feet trudging to a church displaying the Virgin Mary’s dried-up breast milk to me vomiting into a barf bag on a sightseeing boat headed toward the prison-island hell where some Lincoln assassination conspirators were locked up in 1865.41

But how straight is that line? Recent material culture studies are so often interested in the commodity value of historic objects that they do not tell us much about the physical relationship between humans and things. Moreover, scholarly disinterest in the role of religious expression at commemorative sites has prevented scholars from taking seriously the quasi-spiritual physical experience of historical objects so often described by re-enactors and heritage tourists.42 Therefore, in the interest of bridging the gap, let us briefly consider Custis’s “first stone” within a larger context of object fetishism and pilgrimage.

Saints, Relics, and the Systematization of Medieval Object Fetishism

Recent scholarship concerning the early Christian church suggests that ancient animistic object fetishism never really disappeared, but was actually institutionalized in

---


42 Salley M. Promey considers this oversight in Art History a result of what she calls the secularization theory of modernity, “changes in the parameters and conduct of religion as a scholarly discipline, and a set of interests related to the methodological and theoretical inclinations of art history itself.” See Salley M. Promey, “The “Return” of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art,” *Art Bulletin* 85 (2003). I agree that the functional realities of religious habit in everyday life are not adequately recognized throughout the academy, especially in the various literatures concerning objects and memory. Promey may, however, overstate the role of modernity studies’ secularity. German historiography of the past three decades, for example, reveals a significant concern with the relationship between religion and modernity. In fact, a recent work by George S. Williamson identifies important correlations between state nostalgia and Christian theology. See Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany, Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
mainstream society over the course of several centuries. During its earliest days, the Christian church struggled to assert its belief system over those animistic faiths as they were practiced by early pagans. It achieved that, in large part, by co-opting the very pagan belief systems it sought to suppress. Pagan rituals associated a variety of physical objects, places, plants, and animals with otherworldly forces. This long-standing tradition of object fetishism reached well back to ancient Greece and presented a formidable obstacle to wholesale Christian conversion. Rather than undertake the impossible task of forcing its desired converts to accept an entirely new cosmology, church leaders instead deployed their own pantheon of holy objects in the service of proselytization. The church formalized its own version of the pagan object system between 740 and 840 AD. The cult of saints’ relics offered up a host of Christian holy objects intended to resemble and, eventually, replace their pagan precursors.

It worked. Relics have grown so commonplace that their remarkable history is virtually lost amid every day routines of common worship. As originally conceived,
relics—including bodies, body parts, and material possessions—served as vital links to the dead saints to whom they once belonged. I say “vital” here because relics did not simply symbolize saints, they were saints. To the medieval mind, relics were the saints themselves—in functional, cognitive, and intellectual fact—and, in some cases, relics even owned property of their own. The shrines, graves, and reliquaries where one might visit a relic became known as loci sanctorum which, loosely translated, means the place.

Sometime during the last years of the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa (himself later canonized) described visits to these places where the “chilling anonymity of human remains could be thought to be still heavy with the fullness of a beloved person”:

Those who behold them embrace, as it were, the living body in full flower: they bring eye, mouth, ear, all the senses into play, and then, shedding tears of reverence and passion, they address to the martyr their prayers of intercession as though he were present.\(^4\)\(^5\)

This is not a case of symbolic or semiotic slight of hand. Relics were saints and enjoyed rights, possessions, and significant agency within the medieval Christian world. It is a remarkable phenomenon and difficult, I think, for us moderns to fully grasp.

It is not, however, a phenomenon totally absent in our own world. Three mechanisms devised by the early church to maintain the efficacy of its saints’ relics are readily recognizable in modern heritage activities. The first is what we know as the pilgrimage. Before Christianity received official sanction in Rome, ancient codes required that dead bodies be buried beyond city walls. For early Christians wanting to visit the graves of their martyrs, this meant a long walk. As sure as misery loves company, pilgrimages en masse grew fashionable until, as early as the fourth century,

Christian spirituality became associated with the "wilderness" beyond city walls. That association permeated Christian sensibilities and four centuries later, when the Church seriously took up the business of saints' relics, the significance of the pilgrimage as a necessary and desirable form of Christian sacrifice was a matter of course. This was fortunate because early relics were not only scarce—and thus not readily accessible to all worshipers—they were also not terribly interesting to look at. The necessity of a long hard journey bestowed an air of importance upon whatever tiny bone fragment or strand of hair awaited at the end of the journey.

A second mechanism, implied by the act of pilgrimaging, involved proximity and physicality. Among those aspects of pagan tradition preserved by the cult of saints' relics was the importance of touching sacred objects. Touching a relic might cure sickness, mend broken bones, or even restore lost vision. Just approaching a relic promised positive returns. Patrick Geary cites the example of the Canterbury Cathedral whose windows depict Thomas Becket appearing above pilgrims asleep near his shrine. A very different kind of touching occurred when villages punished saints not forthcoming with miracles. A whole variety of elaborate rituals existed for humiliating saints by, believe it or not, beating their relics with sticks! In both of these examples, the devout gained access to the world of heaven through contact with or close exposure to sacred objects. Relics functioned as a kind of medieval prosthesis that allowed their users mobility within the community of saints.

The third mechanism speaks more specifically to the modern phenomenon of historical reproductions—like those used by, for example, Civil War re-enactors and

---

47 Brown refers to this phenomenon as the "therapy of distance" in *The Cult of the Saints*, p. 87.
living history museums—standing in for their referents. Relics were so effective in making Christianity palatable to the pagan sensibility, that by the twelfth century, the church no longer needed their claim to credibility. Over time, and at Rome’s urging, village churches gradually shifted their attention away from local saints and toward a cult of universal saints created and sanctioned by the Church. Worship of universal saints, however, did not necessarily require deference to “true” relics. The cult of the virgin, for example, spread throughout southern Italy at this time and figured statuary, not relics, as its objects of reverence. The Eucharist also proliferated during this period and substituted a miraculous transformation of common objects—bread and wine—for the static presence of a historic relic. This shift toward what we might call virtual relics enabled Rome to populate any sacred object anywhere with meaning unmitigated by local customs and traditions. Standardized conventions of worship gradually replaced the regional diversity once expressed through an equally diverse array of saints’ relics. What remained was a persistent object fetishism cultivated by over five centuries of systematized relic worship. Even virtual relics—especially in the case of the Eucharist—allowed worshipers access to the community of saints through physical interaction.

This is a very brief account of saints’ relics in medieval Europe, but it does suggest that Custis’s commemoration of Washington’s birthplace repeated at least two of the basic mechanisms typical of early Christian object fetishism. His retelling of the details of his voyage on the Lady of the Lake itself functions as a pilgrimage narrative that highlights the difficulty and remoteness of his own particular errand into the wilderness. When he arrives at the loci sanctorum—a remarkably unremarkable place—Custis performs a variety of object rituals. He handles the scattered bricks, once touched

---

49 Geary, Living with the Dead, 175.
by Washington himself, and fashions them into a pedestal atop which "the arms" of all four pilgrims place the inscribed stone. In this case, however, the stone is secondary to the brick beneath it and, if anything, serves to emphasize the significance of the brick itself—a real relic attributed to George Washington. Indeed, Custis did his work well as, over time, "relic" hunters absconded with the bricks leaving only conflicting memories of its original location.

Sacred Past, Secular History: Origins of the Historic Object

The material actualities of Custis's (and Sir Walter Scott's for that matter) historical imagination thus had long precedent in western history. How and why this sort of object fetishism made its way across the Atlantic and into the early republic, however, is another question altogether. The short answer is that medieval object fetishism and its constituent mechanisms survived the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and the Enlightenment in the lives and minds of people who had normalized it in their daily lives over several centuries—that is, nearly everyone. Identifying an intellectual trajectory for this phenomenon—one manifest within the literate world of arts and sciences—is difficult, though, and leads us into the murky waters of an emergent western modernity. In that world, object fetishism survived the various socio-intellectual upheavals spanning the Renaissance and Enlightenment simply by being repackaged with a new kind of object, the historic object. Saints' relics had always functioned as a kind of historic object. It is incorrect, however, to speak of a medieval historic object per se in that pre-Renaissance Western European ideas concerning the past did not grant secular artifacts historical authority. Within the small though powerful world of literate medievals (mostly monks and nobility), the concept of
causation in history—understanding the present as a result of events set in motion over time by humans—had yet to take hold and would not until triggered by a mix of new world discovery and neoclassical revival during the sixteenth century. Even so, the relic’s value had always rested in both its age—its status as a link to an invisible past—and its role within a recorded (read: “remembered”) sequence of events. In this sense, and because relics were the earthly incarnation of immortal heavenly saints, the relic existed simultaneously in the past and the present.

The Church, by way of its relics, thus held a monopoly on historical authority. To maintain and cultivate this authority, the Church issued hagiographic accounts of the saints’ deeds called passios. These church-sanctioned stories about what the saints did, why they were important, and how they should be worshiped reinforced the relic’s function as an intermediary between past and present. The use of text to organize pilgrims’ experience of relics is significant and points toward a proto-historical moment that, consequently, initiated a significant co-mingling of sacred and secular objects prior to the Renaissance. Secular leaders recognized the power manifest in this combination of object and text and, by the early ninth century for example, Frankish court oaths made

---

50 Passio readings during public gatherings at shrines and reliquaries, according to historian Peter Brown, “breached...the paper thin wall between the past and the present” and “made plain [that] time was concentrated at a shrine”:

So the passio brought the past into the present. Coinciding as it did with the high point of the saint’s festival, the reading of the passio gave a vivid, momentary face to the invisible praeentia of the saint. When the passio was read, the saint was “really” there: a sweet scent filled the basilica, the blind, the crippled, and the possessed began to shout that hey now felt his power in healing, and those who had offended him in the past had good reason to tremble.

The passio therefore demonstrates a very early case of textual narrative used to control historical objects by organizing the user’s experience of those objects. Brown, The Cult of the Saints, 81-82.
direct reference to saints' relics: "May God and the saints whose relics these are judge me that I speak the truth."51

But what really blurred the lines between secular and sacred was the Church's embrace of virtual relics. The turn to virtual relics—in part a reaction to the glut of reliquary material that spread throughout Europe following the fall of Constantinople in 1215—made pilgrimages unnecessary. The pilgrimage had always served to emphasize—through its very difficulty—the significance of its objective, that is, the relics themselves. Without a pilgrimage, however, relics were not so interesting. By the middle of the fourteenth century, then, it was not uncommon for churches to pique interest in old boring relics by displaying them alongside griffin eggs, giants' bones, and other "curiosities" of dubious credibility.52 Over time, relics and curiosities became increasingly the same kind of thing. Church treasuries maintained their relics, but increasingly accumulated exotic secular objects—and very old objects like ancient coins and statuary—from throughout the increasingly known world. These spectacular objects certainly brought parishioners back to the church and helped fill coffers, but their proliferation also pointed to something of a cognitive shift wherein secular objects came to possess the kind of fetish value previously reserved for sacred objects. That is, just as

51 Geary, Living with the Dead, 191-92. Positing objects—historical objects no less—as a source of sacred and secular authority thus externalized the locus of individual faith into manageable objects that could, with relative ease, be populated with either religious or political meaning according to the needs of those in or desirous of power. Georg W.F. Hegel, writing in the 1830s, recognized the problematic consequences manifest in this externalization of sacred authority:

The Holy as a mere thing has the character of externality; thus it is capable of being taken possession of by another to my exclusion; it may come into an alien hand, since the process of appropriating it is not one that takes place in Spirit, but is conditioned by its quality as an external object. The highest of human blessings is in the hands of others.

From Hegel's Philosophy of History (1837) cited in Brown, The Cult of the Saints, 86.
relics had long provided a portal into the world of heaven, now curiosities provided a portal into a different world, the world of the previously unknown.

The circumstances responsible for that shift involved advances in long-distance transportation technologies and the consequent discovery of new worlds. Far-flung adventurers brought strange curiosities back from the ever widening corners of the Earth throughout the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries giving rise to what literary historian Stephen Greenblatt describes as a kind of widespread childlike wonder. The link between object fetishism and power, especially the secular kind, persisted. Collecting remnants of antiquity (such as coins) had been a favored pastime of the well-heeled since the latter half of the fourteenth century. Discovery of the New World facilitated a dramatic expansion of the collecting impulse so that by the end of the sixteenth century, wealthy collectors sought to obtain and display historical and natural wonders in private chambers intended for that purpose and variously referred to as curiosity or wonder cabinets.

Curiosity cabinets signified power in two ways. Most obviously, they testified to the wealth and power of the individual capable of amassing so many obscure objects in one place. More significantly, they enabled the collector to bring a representative simulacrum of the entire known world instantly within his gaze. According to historian Tony Bennett, the curiosity cabinet allowed the prince exclusive "access to the order of

53 Stephen Greenblatt discusses the origins of this particular variety of wonder in Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Greenblatt demonstrates that the motivation behind the proliferation of curiosity cabinets in Enlightenment Europe was the extreme sense of childlike wonder—difficult to handle for reserved rationalists of that period—resulting from the discovery and subsequent exploration of the New World. Collectors of New World exotica managed to turn their giddy wonder-intoxication back on their own societies and thus become fascinated by the realm of possibility suggested by humans with horns and other domestic oddities.

the cosmos” and thus “embodied a power-knowledge relation of a very particular kind in
that it reserved to the prince not only the knowledge of the world constituting his
supremacy, but the possibility of knowing itself.” 55 This kind of knowing grew
increasingly valuable during the early days of modern statecraft and the curiosity cabinet
exemplified the prosthetic function of fetishized objects by granting the prince virtual
access to the entire world by way of physical interactions with exotic and historic objects.

Although curiosity cabinets perpetuated a kind of medieval object fetishism, it did
not last for long. Wonder and curiosity suffered during the late seventeenth and
eighteenth centuries amid the high tide of Cartesian rationalism. Descartes himself
ridiculed keepers of Wunderkammer in his “La recherché de la verite par la lumiere
naturelle” (The search for truth through the natural light [of reason]) (1701), associating
them with the occult and dismissing their interest in the “simple forms of knowledge
which are acquired without any recourse to reason, such as languages, history,
geography, or generally anything that depends merely on experience.” 56 Descartes’
disdain for any knowledge obtained through non-critical curiosity spread throughout the
eighteenth century as Isaac Newton and others further cemented the bond between
mathematical precision and divine order. Under this regime of erudite intellectualism,
the entire notion of amateurism came under attack. The word curieux fell out of favor in
France as curiosity had become too closely associated with an “immoderate desire to
know.” 57 The word “amateur” only entered the English vocabulary during the early
nineteenth century and did so with similar negative connotations. Amateur curiosity thus
denigrated, old collections found new uses as fodder for the study of natural history.

55 Bennett, The Birth of the Museum, 36.
56Geekman, The Ambonese Curiosity Cabinet, cvii
57 Ibid., cvii-cix.
Systematic de-wonderment, mixed with new ideas about the proper exercise of state power, placed old private collections in new public buildings—what we now call museums.58

Charles Willson Peale and the Persistence of Object Fetishism

The story played out quite differently, however, in colonial America and in the early republic. While object fetishism languished in Western Europe beneath the taxonomic regimes of enlightenment positivism, it thrived in the fertile intellectual milieu of British North America. The American Philosophical Society, for example, was organized in Philadelphia in 1769 with the expressed goal to explore all aspects of human knowledge so to improve American “agriculture, mechanics, manufacturing, and shipping.” In short order, the Society formed a committee “to get made a Cabinet suitable for keeping the Curiosities &c. belonging to the Society.”59 For nearly two decades the Society accumulated an array of objects—primarily natural curiosities and Native American artifacts—with the hopes of creating in microcosm a material map of the continent. While the Society amassed its own collection, artist and renaissance man extraordinaire Charles Willson Peale worked toward creating his own natural history museum. Desirous of a proper facility for his collection, Peale rented a portion of Philosophical Hall from the Society under the condition that he manage the “depository of the Models, drawings, plans, natural and artificial curiosities, and all their other

58 Ibid., cix. The best treatment of this phenomenon appears in Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum.*
59 The first incarnation of the American Philosophical Society grew out of Benjamin Franklin’s famed Junto in 1743. Although the society threatened to collapse after only a few years, a second organization possessing its own cabinet, the American Society for Promoting Useful Knowledge, had also formed in Philadelphia and the two groups, after long discussion, merged in 1769. Whitfield J. Bell, Jr., *A Cabinet of Curiosities, Five Episodes in the Evolution of American Museums* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1967), 1-3. The American Philosophical Society marked only the first in a long history of prominent American cabinets including William Clark’s Indian Museum in St. Louis (1816-1838), the Western Museum of Cincinnati (1820-1867), and, if we understand its concept and purpose as originating from within this tradition, the Smithsonian Institution (established in 1846).
property; and the same preserve in order, and exhibit at proper times, under the direction of the Curators.”

Under Peale’s curatorial direction, it appears that by the turn of the nineteenth century, the Society’s cabinet still very much resembled the reliquary *cum* curiosity cabinet of old Europe. Beyond an array of specimens of natural and biological interest, the cabinet displayed a variety of coins and medals just as had the princely cabinets of fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe. Manuscripts including William Penn’s 1701 Charter of Privileges and Richard Henry Lee’s papers accompanied portraits and busts of their authors and other revered faces of the past. The Society boasted a collection of objects with special significance for American memory and clearly informed by the age-old reliquary impulse: a box fashioned from the remains of William Penn’s Treaty Elm, a chunk of Plymouth Rock, remains from the capitol building burnt by the British in 1814, the chair in which Thomas Jefferson allegedly sat while writing the Declaration of Independence, and of course, two locks of George Washington’s hair. Among the most popular of Peale’s objects was a cannon ball rumored to have been lobbed at Mary Queen of Scots in 1568 and discovered by none other than Sir Walter Scott.

In Peale’s hands, the Society’s cabinet thus perpetuated the fetishistic impulse so demonized on the other side of the Atlantic. While European curators applied strict taxonomic regimes to animal carcasses displayed in sterile glass cases by size, color, and place of origin, Peale innovated at will. He observed that,

> It is not customary in Europe...to paint skys [sic] and landscapes in their cases of birds and other animals, and it may have a neat and clean appearance to line them only with white paper, but on the other hand it is not only pleasing to view a sketch of a landscape, but by showing the nest, hollow, cave, or a particular view

---

of the country from which they came, some instances of the habits may be
given.\footnote{Cited in Edward P. Alexander, \textit{Museum Masters, Their Museums and Their Influence} (Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1983), 61. Peale’s son, Titian, who later took over the operation, even further evoked a Renaissance sensibility by offering fun mirrors (the kind that distort the onlooker’s appearance) and speaking tubes routed through stuffed animals that mimicked the automatons of the sixteenth century.}

Visitors to Peale’s cabinet witnessed a whole world of taxidermed specimens in naturalistic settings—birds on branches, rodents on dirt mounds, ducks in ponds. He even created complex tableaux with wax manikins surrounded by \textit{trompe l’oeil} paintings. Visitors in adjoining rooms could speak to each other through tubes mounted in lions’ heads, watch “perspective views with changeable effects” (early moving pictures), and observe scenes recreated in three dimensions from Milton’s \textit{Paradise Lost}. In short, Peale animated the inanimate by creating what Gary Kulik calls early “interactive exhibit devices” or, what we might call today, hands-on history.\footnote{Gary Kulik, "Designing the Past: History-Museum Exhibitions from Peale to the Present" in Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., \textit{History Museums in the United States, A Critical Assessment} (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 5. Thomas Schlereth describes Peale’s purposeful presentation of historical objects contextualized by and within evocative environments as a formative moment in the deployment of material culture as educational tool. “To see, to touch a fragment of the past firsthand, to experience directly a surviving historical activity,” Schlereth argues, “remains one of the obvious pedagogical strategies to which we all turn when using material culture data.” Schlereth likens this practice to what art historian Jules Prown calls the “affective mode of apprehension,” the act of evaluating historical motive by placing one’s self in contact with the products of their execution—putting our senses in “affective contact with the sense of the past.” Peale was certainly deft in conjuring the affective mode of apprehension, but he certainly did not create the method. Rather, Peale drew from a long-standing tradition of affective apprehension exported from the old world and into the new. To this extent, Schlereth’s “obvious pedagogical strategy,” also obvious to Peale, was so only because it had been normalized in western culture for nearly a millennia. Thomas J. Schlereth, "History Museums and Material Culture" in Leon and Rosenzweig, \textit{History Museums in the United States}, 334.}

Peale’s influence spread throughout the colonies and the phenomenon did not go unnoticed by European travelers. An English traveler named James Silk Buckingham condemned American museums as being “full of worthless and trashy articles.” Captain Frederick Marryat went further:

such collections as would be made by schoolboys...not...erudite professors and scientific men. Side by side with the most interesting and valuable specimens,
such as the fossil mammoth, etc., you have the greatest puerilities and absurdities in the world—such as a cherrystone formed into a basket, a fragment of the boiler of the Moselle steamer, and heaven knows what besides. Then you invariably have a large collection of daubs, called portraits of eminent personages, one-half of whom a stranger never heard of.64

Americans, however, loved Peale’s museum. In fact, Peale could not stop visitors from touching the fragile displays, even when to do so endangered one’s health. Early taxidermists, including Peale, used arsenic to protect mounted specimens from insect damage. Although Peale posted warning signs to this effect, the problem continued.65 The impulse to touch—so long cultivated by object fetishism—remained strong in early America and it is difficult to know whether Peale’s museum interested visitors because it catered to their tactile predisposition or because it encouraged otherwise impolite behavior. Peale’s impact on representational technologies is clear, though, and we have already encountered one individual who—though specifically taken with objects related to George Washington—replicated Peale’s display methodologies in his very own home.

Objects, the Occult, and the Relic in the United States

But, before returning to Custis, we still must account for the persistence of old-world traditions in the new world despite their concurrent unpopularity in Europe.66 Descartes’ condemnation of the occult points us in a possible direction. The form and function of sixteenth and seventeenth-century aristocratic curiosity cabinets evolved directly from the memory theaters of Renaissance Europe which, themselves, evolved directly from the memory systems of the ancient Greeks. Ancient Greek orators

64 Marryat quoted in Bell, A Cabinet of Curiosities, 21-22.
65 Alexander, Museum Masters, Their Museums and Their Influence, 60.
66 Lawrence Weschler argues that the “resurgence of the Wunder sensibility” in this country during the first half of the nineteenth century accompanied the opening of economic relationships with China which, consequently, exposed American collectors to a vast array of medical “freaks” and exotica not previously seen by westerners. Lawrence Weschler, Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder: Pronged Ants, Horned Humans, Mice on Toast, and Other Marvels of Jurassic Technology (New York: Pantheon, 1995), 138.
developed elaborate systems for remembering large amounts of information. A typical mnemonic device of this variety required that the orator imagine a building and figuratively move through the building's rooms to recover bits of information stored in those rooms. This technique not only survived the Middle Ages, it evolved and expanded to include widely recognized mnemonic aids. Tarot cards, for example, are highly stylized descendents of medieval memory systems.67

The art of memory experienced yet another evolution, though of far greater consequence, during the Renaissance. Full-scale walk-through memory theatres appeared in Europe by the beginning of the sixteenth century. Among the most famous was that built by Giulio Camillo who, with financial support from the king of France, erected what one Paduan called an "amphitheatre, a work of wonderful skill, into which whoever is admitted as spectator will be able to discourse on any subject no less fluently than Cicero."68 What Camillo had built was essentially a three dimensional representation of the ancient Greek memory system—a building with useful information in each room, or in Camillo's case, organized within a small theatre so that the observer at center might take in everything at a glance. The memory theatre tradition thereby provided a perfect structural and functional model for princes desirous of recreating the known world in microcosm within their very own curiosity cabinets.

What is important about the mnemonic origins of the curiosity cabinet is the extent to which, amid the Renaissance's rampant fascination with all things classical, the

---

art of memory grew increasingly associated with other ancient knowledge systems. Ancient mnemonics were thus tossed into a grab bag of astrology, hermeticism, alchemy, and cabalism—exactly what Descartes later labeled the occult.\(^6\) The kind of ordering of the physical universe achieved by the ancient memory systems expressed through the memory theatre found special appeal for a particular group of occultists whose cosmology itself pivoted around object fetishism. Neoplatonic mysticism had existed, largely by way of Saint Augustine, since the Christian Church’s earliest days and sought to identify a great chain of being “in which plants, men, animals, vegetables, minerals, and metals are linked together in complex hierarchies of correspondences.”\(^7\) Just as saints’ relics received renewed interest through affiliation with various exotica, so did the Neoplatonic impulse to understand the world as an orderly procession of things.

As it happened, Neoplatonic intellectual currents figured prominently in the Protestant Reformation and interconnected a variety of Protestant sects—including Anabaptist groups like the Mennonites and Hutterites—who joined the ranks of separatists bound for early seventeenth-century New England. Although we might typically think of Protestantism as being unfriendly to iconography, the form of early American dowry chests, for example, repeated in small the structural logic of memory theatres and curiosity cabinets by organizing women’s familial memories and material possessions into evocative spatial relations. So, it is possible that American Protestantism may have actually preserved old-order object fetishism in custom if not in cognition. Custis himself proudly displayed his mother’s dowry chest at Arlington House

\(^7\) Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 415-17.
indicating that at least he understood it as a physical link to the past. The role of gender is important here and it should also be mentioned that widows in Puritan New England were themselves often referred to as “relicts,” a term identical to our modern “relic.”

Relegating women to the world of material objects speaks volumes about gender, the law, and property rights in colonial New England. But it also demonstrates an awareness of relics as particular kinds of objects that, like mothers, physically connect us to past generations.

Also recall that early Americans—who fled Europe to unburden themselves of tradition, whether sacred or secular—remained deeply vested in belief systems that stressed destiny rather than history. According to Michael Kammen, “they strongly preferred to think about time in theological and millennial terms rather than in historical or chronological terms.” Historian Dorothy Ross additionally argues that Americans remained so convinced that their Revolutionary victory against the British reflected divine mandate that a millenialist impulse continued to inform the nation’s sense of its own past long after the failed revolutions in Europe ushered causation into continental historiography. The country’s first recognized historian, George Bancroft, himself believed that the “Revolution had been foreordained by a benign Providence.” The possibility of American religious beliefs as a venue for the perpetuation of object

---

71 I raise this possibility simply to point toward further avenues of investigation for which I do not have space here. For an introduction to the form and function of dowry furniture, refer to Jeannette Lasansky, A Good Start, The Aussteier or Dowry (Lewisburg, PA: Oral Traditions Project of the Union County Historical Society, 1990). Mention of Custis’ mother’s dowry chest is made in Lossing, “Arlington House,” 439-40.


73 Kammen, Mystic Chords of Memory, 50.


75 Kammen, Mystic Chords of Memory, 34.
fetishism extends to non-millenialist belief systems as well. Deists—including Peale—believed that God’s laws could be inferred through close observation of and interaction with natural objects.\textsuperscript{76} In a very real sense, then, Deists sought access to the world of god through objects as had worshipers of saints’ relics.

I pose the question of religion in part because the outpouring of spiritual expression following George Washington’s death in 1799—an event in which Custis was both highly involved and highly vested—appears to have been inextricably linked with a tradition of object fetishism. Washington’s death inspired a stunning array of commemorative consumables from needlework patterns to water pitchers. Cheap knock-offs of paintings and woodcuts by artists like John James Barralet and Enoch G. Bridley, who depicted the apotheosis of Washington, spread throughout the country on tea pots, wall hangings, and myriad other knick knacks (figure 4). Ironically, much of this—prior to Jefferson’s 1807 Embargo Act—came from Great Britain itself, in a determined effort to glut the new American economy with cheap goods. Even so, American consumers horded Washington memorabilia, especially mourning rings with tiny engravings of Washington’s image. In 1824, Custis himself made a highly symbolic gesture of object reverence by presenting a reliquary ring containing a lock of Washington’s hair to the Marquis de Lafayette (figure 5). Russian diplomat Pavel Svinin commented in 1811 that “every American considers it his sacred duty to have a likeness of Washington in his home, just as we have images of God’s saints.”\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{76} Given that humans counted as animals in Deist cosmology then human material culture—and thus historical objects—were considered natural objects by these folks. This is why Peale felt comfortable hanging portraits of famous people in his museum. Edward P. Alexander, \textit{Museum Masters}, 53. A recent exhibit at the Second National Bank building in Philadelphia attempts to recreate Peale’s arrangement of portraits in his museum.

\textsuperscript{77} John James Barralet’s popular image, \textit{Commemoration of Washington} (1800) inspired designs on consumer goods like pitchers made by potters in Liverpool for the American market. A similarly popular
So, even if the early republic typically eschewed historical commemoration, it evidently maintained its ties with the secular past through a host of what had been, traditionally, sacred object rituals. Some examples of the early American relic sensibility are less overt than others. Take, for example, Harrison Gray Otis’s 1817 description of an ornate table setting “producing something like the effect of a handsome Roman Catholic altar,” or the remarkable social life of small objects like Gilbert Stuart’s silver snuff box. Other examples, however, point to a clear association between systematic object reverence and the cultivation of national identity. Consider the case of Thomas Jefferson who, in 1825, received an inquiry regarding the location of the house in which he drafted the Declaration of Independence. His response is frequently cited: “small things may, perhaps, like the relics of the saints, help to nourish our devotion to this holy bond of our Union, and keep it longer alive and warm in our affections. This effect may give importance to circumstances, however small.”

Jefferson knew well the power of objects. He had been surrounded by the world of sacred relics in Catholic France during his years there as an American ambassador. As president, Jefferson understood the importance of collecting wonders from the Louisiana territory and gave Meriwether Lewis special instructions to work with none other than...

---


Otis is quoted in Barbara G. Carson, Ambitious Appetites, Dining Behavior, and Patterns of Consumption in Federal Washington (Washington, D.C.: The American Institute of Architects Press, 1990). A recent exhibition at the National Gallery of Art featured Stuart’s snuff box, which was valued by the artist community after his death in 1828, passing from Stuart to Isaac P. Davis to Thomas Sully to Garrett C. Neagle and finally to the Atwater Kent Museum in Philadelphia in 1896. Thanks to Barbara Carson for bringing this exhibition to my attention.

Charles Willson Peale to that end. And it was his relationship with Peale that brought to Jefferson’s attention the American Philosophical Society’s acquisition of two chairs made of the elm tree under which William Penn first signed an Indian treaty. In a letter to his granddaughter, Jefferson reflected on the significance of these American relics:

If these things acquire a superstitious value, because of their connection with particular persons, surely a connection with the greater Charter of our Independence may give a value to what has been associated with that; and such was the idea of the enquirers after the room in which it was written. Now I happen still to possess the writing box on which it was written—it claims no merit of particular beauty. It is plain, neat, convenient...Its imaginary value will increase with years [and, in time, may be] carried in the procession of our nation’s birthday, as the relics of the Saints are in those of the Church.”

Here we see Jefferson fully aware of the power manifest in a historic object to capture the public’s imagination in the service of nation building. Just as Rome had once consolidated its power throughout Christendom through the careful distribution and manipulation of saints’ relics and their meaning, Jefferson imagined a United States capable of nourishing patriotic devotion within its people by deploying and managing physical access to state relics. And true to the nation’s founding principles, those relics—like Jefferson’s “plain, neat, and convenient” desk—would bespeak in their form proper republican virtue and the merits of hard work.


81 Jefferson to Ellen Wayles Randolph Coolidge, 14 November 1825, cited in Bedini, *Declaration of Independence Desk,* 35.
George Washington Parke Custis, Re-enactor

Jefferson’s letter to his granddaughter demonstrates an early example of historic objects being put to nationalist ends in this country. Alone, however, historic objects like Jefferson’s writing box lack mnemonic potency. Charles Willson Peale, by championing innovative hands-on object displays set against contextual backdrops, gave life to static objects. Even so, Peale’s scientific leanings rendered him reservedly committed to the didactic value of his objects. It is George Washington Parke Custis who must be credited with taking old-order object fetishism to new heights in this country. Custis certainly understood the political value manifest in American relics. His monument to George Washington’s birth at Popes Creek encouraged common pride in national origins. And Custis clearly recognized the power of context. Erected as it was atop a pile of bricks from Washington’s birth house, Custis’s freestone slab derived its commemorative power from the authentic relics that surrounded it.

But it was Custis’s dramaturgical acumen, his sense of place, and his flare for public spectacle that distinguishes him as perhaps our country’s first historical re-enactor. By the end of his life, Custis had fashioned his Arlington estate into something of a George Washington theme park. As we have seen, Custis regularly hosted thousands of visitors anxious to see and touch the objects once used by George Washington. Nobody, however, would have come to Arlington had Custis not so feverishly promoted his own cause. And, to that end, no object among Custis’s collection was more convincing in its authenticity and historic appeal than Custis himself. Within his Greek Revival home, built high atop a hill overlooking the city that bore his benefactor’s name, Custis—like the portraits on his walls—blended into the cacophony of objects that surrounded him.
Before living-history museums like modern day Colonial Williamsburg ever existed and before the first open-air folk museums sprouted up in Scandinavia at the turn of the last century—even before patriotic ladies associations dressed up in colonial gowns to raise money for charitable causes—George Washington Parke Custis raised the general’s old camp tent and played Washington for all to see.

In this way, Custis played a vitally important role in setting the tone for subsequent performances of public history in this country. The power of his historical productions is perhaps most continually evident at the George Washington Birthplace National Monument. Although Custis’s “first stone” vanished early on, debate concerning its location fueled controversy at the Monument during the 1920s and 1930s and, as we will see, triggered a crisis of authenticity that lasted well into the 1970s. Even to this day, interpretation of historic resources at Washington’s birthplace remains a confused affair because, despite all efforts by the NPS and its corps of public historians, Custis’s commemorative imprint bears remarkable influence. The site still functions as a shrine to which weekend pilgrims travel. It still implies a narrative concerning the link between American character and American landscape. And, most interestingly, it still derives its authority from the presence of historical objects.

Herein lies the real significance of Washington’s birthplace and sites like it. Objects have for so long been figured as existential portals—as real links between this world and the otherworldly—that the fetish value of a memorial, historic site, or artifact is almost always prior to any other value associated with that object. Modern heritage tourism is very much like the medieval pilgrimage, but making that casual comparison implies more than just vague resemblance. It implies structured ritual derived from
centuries of object reverence. It also implies a certain spiritual sensibility remaining from the church's role in formalizing object fetishism. Most importantly, however, it implies a politics of representation. There is no such thing as a meaningless historical object and control of that meaning remains a source of considerable power. Today, the Federal government—by way of the NPS—issues forth regimes of meaning at Washington's birthplace cast in echoes of a millennia-old tradition: "here, in the peace and beauty of this place untouched by time, the staunch character of our hero comes to the imagination."\textsuperscript{82}

CHAPTER II
COSTUMED LADIES AND FEDERAL AGENTS

Despite all efforts by the NPS to perpetuate the myth of a “place untouched by time,” the most distinguishing feature of Washington’s birthplace today is its unwitting preservation of decade upon decade of commemorative recalibration—and each layer invokes the ideological exigencies of its time. This rich history of mnemonic revision reaches back to before the Civil War. Despite whatever importance we might grant Custis’s marker today, the nineteenth-century residents of Virginia’s Northern Neck—people who had their own particular way of remembering George Washington—certainly did not feel compelled to protect or embellish the first stone.\footnote{Custis’s account of his memorial voyage does not tell us how the Popes Creek community received his visit, but we can surmise that they cherished a very different kind of memory of George and his family than the increasingly mythic portrayal perpetuated by Custis and the growing national cult of Washingtonia. By 1815, the Washington family had already been in continuous residence at or near Popes Creek for nearly one hundred and fifty years. Visitors to Washington’s birthplace today are often surprised to learn that Washingtons have roamed the Northern Neck for over three centuries, as if shocked to find that George did not simply materialize one day and vanish the next. Neither prior to 1815 nor since have Northern Neck Virginians needed a monument to recall the \textit{loci sanctorum} where first breathed their most beloved native son.} Various accounts of visits to the birthplace indicate that Custis’s marker had been broken into pieces by 1857 and had entirely disappeared by 1870.\footnote{Hatch, \textit{Popes Creek Plantation}, 64-69.} These same accounts suggest that farmers more interested in cultivating crops than memories periodically repositioned the marker. Relic
seekers also carried away pieces of Custis’s stone and, in this way, the desire to possess a piece of Washingtonia ultimately destroyed the very marker that authenticated those relics.³

Furthermore, as we witnessed in the previous chapter, the American public had not yet reached a widespread consensus about how to remember its past by the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1858, when Washington heir William Lewis Washington deeded land surrounding the birthplace to the Commonwealth of Virginia in trade for a promise to protect and appropriately mark it, interest in preserving the material vestiges of the past had only just become fashionable in this country. Even so, the Civil War put an end to the commonwealth’s plans for the birthplace and, by 1865, Virginia had neither the money nor the resources to make good on its agreement with Washington.⁴

After the war, ambivalence about commemoration yielded to the political business of sectional reunion. Wakefield languished through Reconstruction until an especially patriotic postwar Congress appropriated $3,000 to survey the site. During the summer of 1879, Secretary of State William M. Evarts led a survey party down the Potomac River to consider what might be done with the remains of Washington’s birth site if the Federal government acquired it.⁵ Evarts and his crew encountered a scene akin to Custis’s discovery sixty-four years earlier. Although Custis’s marker had long disappeared, remnants remained of the same dilapidated chimney he mentioned in his

³ This phenomenon was not unique to Washington’s birthplace. Following his death in 1882, famed outlaw Jesse James was buried at the farmstead in Kearney, Missouri where he was born. James’s mother grew so tired of protecting her son’s gravestone from relic seekers that she arranged stones atop the marker in hopes that would-be vandals might be satisfied with a virtual relic. James’s birthplace—and his in-tact gravestone—is open to the public as a museum operated by the Friends of the James Farm.
⁴ Virginia Governor Henry Wise visited the site on 27 April 1858 to accept the gift and inspect the property. His visit encouraged a joint resolution of the Virginia Assembly to appropriate $5000 to protect the site. Adjacent landowner and Washington family representative John E. Wilson donated additional land to expand the home site and provide rights-of-way in 1859. See Hatch, *Popes Creek Plantation*, 69.
⁵ Oculus, “Cultural Landscape Report,” 2.41. See HJ Res. 94, 46th Congress.
After speaking with some local residents, Evarts evidently decided that the chimney more-or-less approximated the site of Custis’s original marker and was, therefore, the site of Washington’s birth. Satisfied with his survey, he returned to Washington and petitioned Congress for $30,000 to erect a suitable memorial there. Congress complied in February 1881 and Virginia Governor William E. Jameson, happy to unburden the commonwealth of a responsibility it could not fulfill, deeded at no cost the old William Lewis Washington parcel and the Washington family burial ground—about a mile north of the birth site—to the United States in April 1882. Evarts needed more than money, however, to build anything at Popes Creek. Surrounded by water on two sides and without roads, the site lacked a practical access point for delivery of supplies and laborers. Evarts delayed further development until moneys were appropriated to construct a wharf at the site. Although the delay eclipsed Evarts’ own term in office, his replacement, Secretary of State James G. Blaine, took up where Evarts left off and approved a commemorative plan drafted by the Boston architectural firm Home & Dodd in April 1881. The plan proposed to relocate the Washington family burial vault—about a mile northwest of the birth site—to a spot adjacent the old chimney. Both the vault and the chimney were to be enclosed within a single granite sarcophagus with bronze doors and a grille for visitors to look through.

Local resident John E. Wilson—who inherited Wakefield in 1867 by marrying William Augustine Washington’s granddaughter Betty—chaffed at the idea of disinterring several generations of the Washington family. Wilson’s protests convinced Blaine to

---

6 See Custis, Recollection and Private Memoirs, 68.
7 Congress granted the appropriation on 26 February 1881 and Jameson deeded the land to the U.S. on 21 April 1882. See H Res. 315, 46th Congress.
8 Hatch, Popes Creek Plantation, 72.
reconsider. A decade passed without further deliberation until, in 1893, Congress approved less ambitious plans to erect a simple fifty-foot granite obelisk atop the birth site. John Crawford & Son of Buffalo, New York designed the memorial and raised it in 1896. Congress placed supervision of the site under the War Department’s Corps of Engineers’ Office of Public Buildings and Grounds and appointed a caretaker (figure 6).

Although it seems odd now, it was not uncommon during the latter half of the nineteenth century for the U.S. War Department to supervise Federal historic sites. It unwittingly obtained its first in 1861 by seizing and later restoring Robert E. Lee’s home in Arlington, VA—the very house built by George Washington Parke Custis between 1802 and 1818. The Custis-Lee house set a precedent. Congress placed a host of historic sites and buildings, mostly associated with Civil War battles (including those at Chattanooga, Gettysburg, Shiloh, and Vicksburg) under War Department supervision. In this way, despite its lack of military significance, historic Wakefield too fell under War Department control. Understanding what happened at Washington’s birthplace during the last years of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth is consequently difficult as the War Department tended its properties—including Wakefield—inconsistently. Maintenance records from this period consist of a hundred or so index cards describing—often in less than three sentences—daily chores performed in and around the monument. The only known improvements undertaken during this period were done with private funding as when the Colonial Dames in Virginia funded the

9 Ibid., 63.
10 SJ Res. 102, 52nd Congress provided authority to undertake the project. Large-format facsimiles of schematic drawings of the granite obelisk produced in 1889 by the Corps of Engineers are available in NPS Records, GEWA.
11 Hosmer, Preservation Comes of Age, 469-77.
construction of a cement block enclosure for the Washington family burial ground in 1906.12

The Colonial Revival in Form and Theory

But Wakefield’s turn-of-the-century calm belied the cultural upheaval unfolding elsewhere between the end of the Civil War and the onset of World War I. The maturation of market capitalism, rampant industrial expansion, revolutionary advances in transportation technology, and an increasingly diverse population created stresses and opportunities never before experienced in the United States. Consequently, ideas about history and memorialization underwent a similar upheaval. When merged with old ideas about republican virtue, the mid-century’s glorification of commercial profit encouraged a new culture of leisure that tried, awkwardly at times, to blend entertainment and education. The result, according to Historian David Chapin, was an antebellum culture of curiosity fed by a vast array of spectacular amusements including public lectures, museums, and even séances.13 So, while the early republic frowned upon historical idolatry, nineteenth-century Americans increasingly sought out sensational links to their past and, consequently, could not get enough colonial bric-a-brac. Artists like Wallace Nutting popularized reproduction furniture and hand-tinted photographs of a mythic yesteryear. Many scholars attribute the beginnings of this so-called Colonial Revival to a nostalgic patriotism that became widespread in the 1840s as sectional tension increased and revolutionary leaders died away.14 Some Americans responded, the argument goes,
by preserving the tumbledown homes of their famed first leaders. Others filled their own homes with stylized relics of a bygone era.15

That response blossomed, unsurprisingly, into a veritable cult of Washington. Fascination with George Washington escalated throughout the nineteenth century, finding increasingly bizarre expression in the chaotic cultural milieu of the pre-war years. P.T. Barnum, for example, got his start as a professional huckster in 1835 when he toured the country with an elderly slave named Joice Heth. Heth claimed to have nursed the infant George Washington at Wakefield an impossible century prior. Despite her unlikely story, Heth tantalized crowds with tales of raising young Washington.16 Elsewhere, organizations formed to preserve buildings associated with the life and career of George Washington. In 1839, for example, author Washington Irving organized a committee to restore the house where Washington established his command headquarters at Newburgh,
New York during 1782 and 1783.\textsuperscript{17} Mid-century Americans thus consolidated their collective memory of George Washington through the purposeful manipulation of historical objects even when, as in Heth's case, commemoration denied the basic humanity of its referent.

Most famously, Ann Pamela Cunningham organized the Mount Vernon Ladies Association (MVLA) in 1853 to save Washington's adult home from the ravages of modernity. Much has been made of the MVLA's cultural and historical significance, and for good reason.\textsuperscript{18} Cunningham effectively wed the cult of domesticity to the cult of Washington and created by their union a template from which thousands of well-heeled white women throughout the country found entry into the public sphere. That template, what we now call the historic house museum, found especially strong expression at Wakefield. As we will see, Josephine Wheelwright Rust's Wakefield National Memorial Association consciously mimicked Cunningham's example and intended its commemorative landscape—including the Memorial House—to be "a shrine like Mount Vernon [italics added], to which all Americans can go."\textsuperscript{19}

In fact, the Colonial Revival adopted as its own a whole host of representational strategies, like the historic house museum, that sought, in historian Stephen Bann's

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{17}West, \textit{Domesticating History}, 4-5.
\textsuperscript{18}Volumes have been written about the MVLA. West provides an excellent discussion of the organization and its significance in chapter 1 of \textit{Domesticating History}. Marling also explores the significance of the MVLA throughout \textit{George Washington Slept Here}, especially with regard to the Mount Vernon restoration (53-84) and its role within the historic house movement (85-114). Also see John A. Herbst, "Historic Houses" in Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., \textit{History Museums in the United States, A Critical Assessment} (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 98. For a contemporary account of the Association and its restoration, see Paul Wilstach, \textit{Mount Vernon: Washington's Home and the Nation's Shrine} (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1925).
\textsuperscript{19}Minutes of the WNMA, 1 June 1923, Wakefield Files, FAC Records, RG 66, National Archives Building, Washington, DC (NAB).
\end{flushleft}
words, a “restoration of the life-like.”20 During the Civil War, for instance, the U.S. Sanitary Commission (a predecessor to the Red Cross) raised money for the care of Union soldiers by dressing its female members in colonial costumes and having them serve “colonial” food to contributors seated in stylized colonial kitchens.21 The first of these debuted at the Brooklyn and Long Island Sanitary Fair on, unsurprisingly, February 22, 1864—Washington’s birthday. Postwar variations on this theme included the Martha Washington Tea, a prim affair during which ladies in colonial costumes served tea to one another in presumed colonial fashion. Charitable teas grew increasingly elaborate over the years and eventually included grand balls and elegant pageants. The MVLA itself staged large-scale fundraising teas in Richmond and Baltimore in 1875.22

In a similar vein, the 1876 International Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia featured a New England Farmer’s Home complete with simulated colonial kitchen (figure 7). Nearby, in the U.S. Government Building, visitors beheld a re-creation of Washington’s headquarters at Morristown, New Jersey where the general’s clothes lay draped across period furniture as if awaiting his return.23 This display, subtly animated by the suggestion of recent activity, heralded the latest trend in Colonial Revival tableau: the period room. Period rooms were just that, rooms painstakingly decorated to perfectly evoke a particular historical moment—essentially a collection of temporally continuous objects that, when taken in sum, might just as well have existed in situ somewhere and sometime else. George Sheldon and the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association

---

20 Bann, The Clothing of Clio, 14-15. Bann argues that the “utopia of life-like reproduction” constitutes a common response to a sense of loss and attempts to recover whatever is perceived to be lost.
22 Marling, George Washington Slept Here, 44.
23 Roth, "The New England, or "Olde tyme," Kitchen,” 159-60; and Marling, George Washington Slept Here, 27.
opened a series of period rooms at Deerfield, Massachusetts, in 1880 where visitors could tour a colonial kitchen, an “old-time” parlor, and a reconstructed bedroom. Another pioneer, Charles Wilcomb, opened a colonial period room in 1896 in San Francisco. George Francis Dow is often cited as perfecting the concept in 1907 at the Peabody Essex Institute in Salem, Massachusetts, after being inspired by Arthur Hazelius’s life-like tableaus of Scandinavian folk life at the Nordiska Museum in Sweden. The period room achieved full maturation in the halls of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s American Wing in 1924.

It has become commonplace to explain the Colonial Revival’s “restoration of the life-like” and other instances of fin-de-siècle antimodernism as a reaction to the dizzying array of new technologies and social experiences then at hand. It is well known, for instance, that the late nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts Movement, originating in Britain and led by writer and designer William Morris, reacted to the perceived sterility of industrial design. Indeed, reactionary utopianism flourished among nineteenth-

---

century intellectuals, including literary illuminati like Henry David Thoreau and Bronson Alcott. And social reformers fought endlessly against the moral corruption they attributed to industrial society. With a few very important exceptions, however, the Colonial Revival was part of a much older mode of historical simulation. In fact, common to all of these reactionary impulses was exactly the kind of object fetishism that characterized the Custis memorial at Popes Creek in 1815. Joice Heth, after all, was a perfect living relic and Barnum made a small fortune off people willing to pay just to shake her hand. Historian Benjamin Reiss observes that "if Heth was a conduit to the mythic past, then it was presumed to be her body—and not just her story—that exalted her."28 Heth, like the cornucopia of historical artifice increasingly in circulation during the nineteenth century, continued a very long tradition of dubious objects deriving legitimacy from nothing more than persistent veneration and constant touching.

And it hardly comes as a surprise that turn-of-the-century America witnessed a resurgent interest in the occult and all things medieval. T.J. Jackson Lears—who is perhaps most responsible for putting forth the thesis that coping with change best characterized the distinctive cultural mode of the time—demonstrates that many Americans affected their own stylized monasticism in reaction to a nation hell bent on shifting into high-gear market capitalism. Van Wyck Brooks himself, the man responsible for coining the phrase "usable past" which, beginning in 1918, became a slogan for colonial revivalists everywhere, only came to his conclusions about the importance of a past with meaning after traveling the intellectual back roads of medieval


28 Reiss, The Showman and the Slave, 68.
mysticism, catholic asceticism, and other antimodernist safe havens. Mark Twain played with the idea of resurgent Medievalism in his *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889). And in *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* (1904), Henry Adams waxed philosophical about medieval man’s architectural reach toward the infinite as his niece fiddled about with a portable Kodak camera. Adams’ example is especially poignant with regard to object fetishism, medievalism, and antimodernism. No turn-of-the-century technology brought American object fetishism into relief more so than the easy-use personal camera. Photographs are the most perfect modern expression of ready-made relics; post-mortem photography—common during the turn of the nineteenth century—was perhaps the most striking modern permutation of the same phenomenon responsible for the Washington reliquary rings of a century prior and the grand pilgrimages of centuries long past.\(^3\)

But as America’s fretful bourgeoisies worked to turn the clock back, its working peoples struggled to make sense of new and often tantalizing technologies. It would be wrong to consider seemingly strange phenomena like post-mortem photography as merely a naïve or misguided use of a new and unfamiliar technology. If anything, the explosion of new technologies at the turn of the century provided more opportunities than had ever existed before for Americans to express what remained of an intuitive if residual medieval fetishism. The popular myth of folksy Luddites duped by new technology has been most famously perpetuated by incautious interpretations of crowd reactions to the Lumière brothers’ 1895 one-shot film, *Arrival of a Train at the Station*. Generally considered the world’s first motion picture, the short film (less than a minute) portrayed a

---

29 Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 251-57.
locomotive gaining speed toward its audience. Legend holds that viewers mistook the cinematic train for the real thing and cowered in their seats. Film historian Tom Gunning demonstrates, however, that audience fears—to the extent that any existed—did not result from mistaking the image of a train for the real thing, but rather from a culture of thrill-seeking long cultivated by trompe l’oeil illusion and ingenious theatrical artifice. In fact, to avoid confusion, the Lumière brothers showed their films frame by frame at first, as if presenting a series of stills, before shifting into full projection speed. This kind of authorial mediation safeguarded against confusion while thrilling crowds with the shock of raw kinetic transformation, precisely what the legends misconstrue as fear.

In this way, the cinema refined a realm of visual manipulation long inhabited by the likes of P.T. Barnum, C.W. Peale, G.W.P. Custis, and long before them, the wonder cabinets and mnemonic architecture of the late Renaissance. In each case, the manipulative impulse served a physical end—to bring the viewer’s entire body into communion with a set of heady objects. Film certainly problematized what qualified as an object—is the train on the screen real? In a very important way, this kind of phenomenological ambiguity (and responses to it) is the great hallmark of turn-of-the-century technologies. Innovations like the telephone, the phonograph, and even statistical methods like demographic profiling offered for the first time on a truly grand scale representational substitutions—the disembodied voice, the concert-less concerto, the opinion poll—in place of good old physical immediacy. The proliferation of virtual

---

31 Tom Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment, Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator” Art & Text 34 (Spring 1989).
technologies, however, did not beget an instant and insoluble simulacrum. Rather, individuals made new technologies serve old ends. To this extent, the Colonial Revival might be understood as a period during which ancient ideas about the triadic relationship between people, objects, and the past found new and increasingly visible expression by way of new technologies that permitted, in some cases, the creation of convincing replicas and, in others, the mass-production of oldish objects.\(^3\)\(^4\)

**Of Dollhouses and Historical Meaning**

If we accept this line of argument, then the Colonial Revival’s historic house museums, colonial kitchens, and period rooms must be understood not simply as material instantiations of a longing for a simpler past, but rather as innovative expressions of long-standing beliefs made possible by new technologies of representation. But moving away from what seems to have become nostalgia’s explanatory death grip on all matters of turn of the century memory is not so easily done. Among the most formidable obstacles to doing so is cultural historian and literary critic Susan Stewart’s book *On Longing* (1993). Stewart argues that the pursuit of authentic experience—for an authentic object—becomes critical when exchange economies mature and experience moments of developmental crisis. The first decades of the twentieth century in this country, with their labor strife and violence, are a case in point. Stewart argues that during these moments,

\(^3\)\(^4\) It is no accident that this same period witnessed the maturation of historical methodology. The birth of modern historical method—vigorous interrogation of primary sources and historiographical awareness—is typically associated with the nineteenth-century German historian, Leopold Van Ranke. Historian Stephen Bann argues, however, that what distinguished the period between 1750 and 1850 was not a new professionalized history, but rather “the increasingly expert production of pseudo-historical forgeries.” He points to a long tradition of historical forgeries prior to the turn of the nineteenth century, which, especially with regard to the study of Roman Britain, compromised historical understanding for a long time. The era of Ranke and the Romantics— Sir Walter Scott foremost among them—may have inaugurated a period preoccupied with authenticity but, as Bann argues, “the critical preoccupation with authenticity, and the transgressive wish to simulate authenticity, are in a certain sense, two sides of the same coin.” See Bann, *The Clothing of Clio*, 2.
unbridled commodification mediates and, consequently, makes the individual’s phenomenological reality so abstract that myths about ‘real’ experiences and ‘authentic’ things that exist “beyond the horizon of present lived experience” gain currency. In cataloguing various instances of this kind of myth making, Stewart suggests that toys provide a medium through which humans “test the relation between materiality and meaning.” She posits the dollhouse—a particularly popular Victorian toy—as a vehicle by which narratives concerning wealth and nostalgia are deployed to particular ends, namely the preservation of social conventions perceived to be in jeopardy at the hands of modernity.\textsuperscript{35}

Stewart’s argument is compelling and convincing at that, but how do we account for the dollhouse’s (or versions thereof) popularity in times not characterized by advanced market economies or mournful longing? Stewart herself points out that the dollhouse evolved directly from medieval crèches that, in their ordering of wooden figurines, made clear statements about the appropriate physical relationship between sacred and secular.\textsuperscript{36} She even suggests that the relationships communicated by crèches found further expression in the curiosity cabinets of early modern Europe. Keeping in mind what we have discussed regarding medieval fetishism, it might be argued that dollhouses, rather than predicated on narratives of longing and nostalgia, are rather very vocal statements about the proper relationship between humans and things at any given time or place. If we were to take the argument a step further, it would not be unreasonable to assert that the great achievement of the Colonial Revival and its ladies

\textsuperscript{35} Stewart, \textit{On Longing}, 58, 61-65, 133.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 61.
associations was to make these templates for universal order, that is, these dollhouses, habitable in a very real way.37

Historic house museums, colonial kitchens, and period rooms deployed a complicated regime of signs that replicated almost perfectly, albeit on a far grander scale, the connotative meaning of dollhouses. Dollhouses, by virtue of being houses within houses, posit a particular relationship between interiority and exteriority. Historic house museums preserve that relationship in terms of public and private: who belongs inside, who does not, how that access is negotiated, and so on. As Stewart demonstrates, dollhouses connote wealth—with few exceptions, proper dollhouses simulate ‘fine’ living—though remain affordable. House museums and their various permutations more often than not also simulate wealth, especially those that portray the lives of the historically wealthy for mostly middle class visitors. Dollhouses also imply a particular narrative about time. They suggest a desire for the perfect moment—a frozen, unchanging, and wonderfully predictable moment.38 Although that moment is recognized as being historic, it is more importantly a moment during which humans and objects settle into a rare harmony of predictable signification predicated on—not unlike modern-day Civil War re-enactments—an unassailable teleological certainty.39

37 And if we were to take the argument yet another step further, we would need to discuss the character of life in a dollhouse, perhaps what Henrik Ibsen—who certainly witnessed the proliferation of lifelike historical tableau and early costumed interpretation throughout Scandinavia—was up to in his late-century play, “A Doll’s House” (1879).
39 Thanks to Rich Lowry for suggesting this apt phrase.
Also like dollhouses, the contents and interpretive intent of historic house museums and period rooms shifted with the interests of their proprietors. In fact, the popularity of the period room coincided with an important change in the Colonial Revival sensibility. Dow’s rooms, for example, claimed to depict rustic colonial life, but were far more ornate than anything eighteenth-century commoners would have actually experienced. Dow’s gentrification of the past was not unique and this waning of the rustic allure may have been a reaction to the economic excesses of the time. Mike Wallace argues that labor-related violence at the end of the nineteenth century convinced America’s xenophobic moneyed elite of the need to “Americanize” an immigrant working class. Wallace attributes the maturation of the Colonial Revival and the simultaneous proliferation of war shrines, soldier monuments, and historical societies to this Americanization project. For the wealthy descendents of America’s first families who chafed at the pretenses of the nouveau riche, this project included a reinvestment in genealogy and thus a turn in period rooms and museums toward a more “dignified” past, what Celia Betsky describes as a shift “from the spinning wheel to the spinet.” Thus, unlike the 1876 Centennial Exhibition’s popular colonial kitchen display, Chicago’s 1893 Columbian Exhibition featured genteel sitting rooms in private historical homes.

40 This is not to say that his rooms were cluttered. On the contrary, Dow’s rooms were almost bare keeping with what some have described as a turn-of-the-century upper-class distaste for the Victorian interior. Kulik, “Designing the Past,” 13.
43 Betsky, “Inside the Past,” 266. A telling example of this sort of turn-of-the-century retrenchment unfolded in Litchfield, Connecticut. In 1913, the community’s Improvement Society set to remodeling all of the town’s public and commercial buildings in a style befitting its long history and colonial homes.
phenomenon corresponded with a widespread focus on high art throughout the museum world, a process of "sacralization" that historian Lawrence Levine credits in part for the emergence of cultural hierarchy in this country during the turn of the last century.44

The Colonial Revival's investment in erudite gentility found full expression at the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art where, in 1924, a number of forces in the field of historic preservation—including Dow and Louis DuPont Crowninshield, who would later serve as president of the Wakefield Association—presented a widely influential show of recreated colonial interiors meticulously pieced together with salvaged wall paneling, period antiques, and carefully chosen domestic furnishings.45

The words of the exhibit's first curator, R.T.H. Halsey (who, coincidentally, enjoyed bragging of his grandfather's association with George Washington46), demonstrate the extent to which, by the 1920s, the Colonial Revival had become irrevocably tied to an entrenched filiopietism:

[The exhibit is] a visual personification of home life in this country...[of which] the influx of foreign ideas utterly at variance with those held by the men who gave us the Republic, threaten, and unless checked, may shake the foundations...[of]...traditions so dear to us and so invaluable in the

Although already an exclusive community by merit of wealth and lineage, Litchfield virtually excised itself from the modern world and created for itself a colonial wonderland impervious to anyone lacking the requisite wealth or, more importantly, family tree. Frye, "The Beginnings of the Period Room in American Museums," 232-33.


Americanization of many of our people, to whom much of our history is little known. Although the motives and methods changed in the seventy years since the Mount Vernon ladies began their work, the belief in the moralizing powers of historical objects evidently had not. The exhibit's first visitors included a host of poor young women brought to the museum on tours sponsored by various New York settlement houses. In this way, the Colonial Revivalists saw fit to populate their houses with dolls in training.

And prior to the first decades of the twentieth century, women—though of a very different socioeconomic stripe than the settlement house girls—largely controlled activity within the Colonial Revival’s life-sized dollhouses. Although prominent men like Dow and Halsey are credited with refining the period room and, as a result, the historic house museum, the operation and management of these places more often than not fell to well-off white women. Historic house museums, just like their miniature analogues, enabled American women to express ideas about propriety, order, and patriotism at a time when opportunities for entry into the male world of public discourse were few and far between. Although American women had remained more-or-less bereft of a public voice during the eighteenth century, the rhetoric of republicanism created new opportunities for expression beginning in the early nineteenth century. Dolly Madison's rescue of Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington from destruction during the British sack of Washington in 1814 represented an early popular example of how women might distinguish themselves publicly through noble acts undertaken within the domestic sphere. Her protection of Washington's portrait invoked a larger metaphor about the

American woman’s patriotic duty to nurture republican values in her male children—the country’s future leaders.48

The Colonial Revival created even more opportunities for women to speak and act publicly—and even politically—in the years preceding the 19th amendment. Marling argues that, in the few short decades between the popularization of colonial kitchens and their blossoming into full-blown period rooms, “the politically disenfranchised women of America had contrived to waltz, all but unnoticed, onto the state of public affairs, wearing their great-great-grandmothers’ ballgowns and locks of George Washington’s hair done up in brooches.”49 Although Pamela Cunningham’s creation of the MLVA in 1853 created a model for public expression of female civic virtue, it was the hereditary and patriotic societies of the late nineteenth century that gave force and focus to that expression. Widely influential—and still extant—organizations like the Daughters of the American Revolution, the National Society of Colonial Dames, the Mayflower Descendants, and the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities forged the ideological framework of the Colonial Revival.50

---


Period rooms and historic house museums made public what society members had long expressed privately, perhaps even within their own dollhouses. They provided a public venue through which powerful ladies associations performed carefully coded social rituals contextualized and enriched within a regime of highly symbolic historical objects. The historic house museum was, for American women at the turn of the twentieth century, what the memory theatre and curiosity cabinet was for men in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe: a formalized expression of a desired universal order expressed through the careful organization and presentation of objects. This is not an exaggeration. As Kenneth Ames has demonstrated in his fascinating study of Victorian American home furnishings, Death in the Dining Room (1992), late-century domestic furnishings conveyed a panoply of meanings in middle and upper-class homes. Ames shows, for example, how elaborately decorated sideboards conveyed important meanings about gender, nature, and the proper function of home to Victorian Americans conversant in that era’s “iconography of dining.” He also documents the proliferation of mottoes in nineteenth-century homes. Mottoes, decorative images and sayings often printed or embroidered onto wall hangings, are distinctly medieval in both origin and effect. Ames argues that these carefully crafted icons conveyed readily recognized

51 My likening of historic house museums to dollhouses may seem like a big leap, but consider the story of Colleen Moore. Having achieved fame as a film actor during the 1920s, Colleen Moore invested a portion of her wealth into the construction of a massive dollhouse that she took on tour around the country between 1935 and 1939 to raise money for disabled and disadvantaged children. The tour was a massive success, drawing thousands of onlookers, most of whom were adults. A photo from a book published in conjunction with the tour pictures Moore sitting inside the Great Hall of her dollhouse playing with its contents. Leslie Parks considers this episode for what it reveals about the communication of domestic values during the Depression and demonstrates that, counter to Stewart's claims, dollhouses deploy meanings beyond escapism and interiority. Moreover, the example of Colleen Moore reveals that visitors to the Memorial House and other historic house museums during the 1930s would have been accustomed to the meanings manifest in simulated domesticity. Leslie Paris, "Small mercies: Colleen Moore's Doll House and the national Charity Tour," in Acts of Possession.
meanings in the service of ideological domesticity.\textsuperscript{52} In this way, Victorian Americans communicated through domestic objects, and historic house museums—just like American homes and their tiny simulacra within—provided women with opportunities to rearrange those objects in order to write themselves back into history. This phenomenon underlies historian Patricia West’s important argument that historic house museums document “women’s relationship to the public sphere.”\textsuperscript{53}

Although the Colonial Revival and its ladies associations looked toward the past for inspiration and deployed historical objects in ways informed by a long tradition of object fetishism, historic house museums and period rooms—dollhouses made ‘real’—granted American women new control over the terms by which they publicly told their own stories. It did not take long, however, for husbands to realize that, by the end of the nineteenth century, their wives’ social organizations were up to more than just socializing. Groups like the MVLA and the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA) had generated considerable political clout and men working in government, museums, and academia took notice. State and federal governments, which previously considered the women’s role as auxiliary to the male-dominated world of politics, turned a more interested eye toward historic preservation.

As we have seen, the male curators of influential museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art involved themselves in the Colonial Revival during the first decades of the twentieth century. Consequently, the ranks of volunteer women who had donned colonial costumes and dedicated themselves to the care and revision of the nation’s domestic history found themselves replaced by professional men trained in history and

\textsuperscript{52} Kenneth L. Ames, \textit{Death in the Dining Room & Other Tales of Victorian Culture} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 44-96, 97-147

\textsuperscript{53} West, \textit{Domesticating History}, 159.
new disciplines like the curatorial sciences. That shift found particularly strong expression in the 1923 appointment of Harvard-trained art historian Fiske Kimball as chair of the committee assembled to restore Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello near Charlottesville, Virginia. Kimball, who deployed his professional acumen in the service of honoring American republicanism, represented not only a gender shift in the operation of historic house museums, but also a central ideological shift. Whereas ladies associations presented house museums in ways that conveyed messages about order and domesticity, Kimball pledged himself to authenticity. Invoking the pioneering German historian, Leopold Von Ranke, Kimball believed in the possibility of an objective and scientific historical method achieved through precision and exactitude. Kimball, and an ensuing generation of male museum professionals, set to overhauling the nation’s historic house museums by replacing idiosyncratic furnishings and attempting wherever possible to re-create the material past as closely as possible.54 All the while, ladies associations found themselves increasingly relegated to event planning and the production of historical pageants rather than the more serious business of safeguarding the nation’s historical treasures.55

Josephine Wheelwright Rust and the Wakefield National Memorial Association

But that shift was neither immediate nor complete. Numerous ladies associations survived the professionalization of historic house museums and some, particularly the

54 For an excellent discussion of the gender shift in house museum curatorship and the particular role of Fiske Kimball in that shift, see West, Domesticating History, 48-50, 121-27.
55 Marling describes the period between 1905 and the mid-1920s as the “golden era of pageantry.” Pageants were often held outdoors during daylight hours and made use of volunteer casts and minimal stage settings. They relied upon recognizable symbols—such as a white “x” to indicate a continental soldier and a white wig and cape to depict George Washington—rather than elaborate costumes or dialogue. Marling, George Washington Slept Here, 196. The authoritative work on twentieth-century American pageantry is David Glassberg, American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early 20th Century (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).
MVLA, retained impressive power and continue to thrive. That organizations like the MVLA persist attests to the power and vitality of long-standing ideas about memory and objects. Washington’s birthplace offers a case in point. The very same year Kimball took his position at Monticello, a wealthy Washington, D.C. socialite named Josephine Wheelwright Rust set to organizing her own association to protect and commemorate the site of George Washington’s birth. Rust typified, in all respects, the early twentieth-century female colonial revivalist (figure 8). She was born into a well-off family near Oak Grove, Virginia—only a few miles from Washington’s birthplace—in 1864 to a confederate surgeon named Frederick Dodge Wheelwright and his second wife, Eleanor Ann Hungerford. Rust’s mother was herself a descendent of the Washington family and grew up in Twiford, a house built during the Revolution and, as rumor had it, after the design of Wakefield.

In 1892 Josephine married fellow Westmoreland County native Harry Lee Rust who did very well for himself selling insurance, well enough in fact to set out on his own and establish the H.L. Rust Company. The newlyweds moved to Washington, D.C.

---

56 For biographic information concerning Rust and her family, see Mallory, "Mrs. Josephine Wheelwright Rust," 5240-46; Ellsworth Marshall Rust, Rust of Virginia, Genealogical and Biographical Sketches of the Descendants of William Rust, 1654-1940 (Washington, 1940), 248-51; and Charles A. Hoppin, Some Descendants of Colonel John Washington and of His Brother Captain Lawrence Washington (Washington, 1932). Hoppin, in explaining Rust’s motivations at Wakefield, described her birth in amusingly overwrought language:

Born near to within sight of where the immortal Washington’s life began; his playground as a child the scene of many of her own days of happy youth; the decayed last resting-place in mother earth of Washington’s ancestors who, also, were among her own forebears; the realization in her mature years of the world’s neglect of them, and of the inadequacy of the national honor paid to the revered scene of Washington’s birth—of these, her early experiences inspired her, and grieved became her mediations over the later insufficiencies.

Hoppin, Some Descendants, 139.

57 Twiford is a substantial building and would have, during the eighteenth century, connoted wealth. See Hoppin, Some Descendants, 123.

58 The H.L. Rust Company was founded in 1889 by Rust as a mortgage-banking firm. It later provided insurance, property management, and real estate sales, and mortgage loan services. Rust passed the company to his son, H.L. Rust Jr. in 1938 who then sold the family’s interests in 1960. The company continues to operate today as the Rust Insurance Agency, Inc.
where Josephine, like other wealthy white women during the early years of popular progressive reform, filled her time with charitable work. She supported the construction of the Washington National Cathedral (1907-1990). She assisted civilian victims of World War I through her work with foreign embassies. Most importantly, Rust joined a variety of patriotic organizations including the Society of Colonial Dames of America, the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Society of Daughters of 1812.\textsuperscript{59}

Rust had always cherished childhood memories of her mother’s home at Twiford and delighted in its alleged connections with the Washington family home at Wakefield. On March 8, 1923, she invited Thomas E. Green and Marcus Benjamin to her apartment at 2400 Sixteenth Street to discuss the possibility of forming a patriotic organization of her own to buy the Wakefield property.\textsuperscript{60} Although the Federal government owned a parcel of land on what was once the Washington family estate on Popes Creek, Rust hoped to acquire additional acreage in hopes of protecting the entirety of Wakefield. Both Green, who directed the Red Cross’s National Publicity Bureau, and Benjamin—historian of the Society of the Sons of the American Revolution—supported Rust’s proposal and the three agreed to make her president of the new Wakefield Memorial Association. Rust met with Benjamin a month later and reported that she had convinced a number of Washington, D.C. notables to support the project. Moreover, Rust convinced several members of the National Association of Colonial Dames of America to

\textsuperscript{59} Mallory, "Mrs. Josephine Wheelwright Rust," 5242.
\textsuperscript{60} Minutes of the WNMA, 8 March 1923, FAC Records, RG 66, NAB. Green served as the Director of the National Publicity Bureau of the Red Cross, likely an associate of Rust during her war relief days. Benjamin (1857-1932) was affiliated with the U.S. National Museum (Smithsonian Institution) and served as Historian of the Society of the Sons of the American Revolution—he is mentioned in “Graves to be Marked, Maltese Crosses to Denote Burial Places of Revolutionary Soldiers” The Evening Star (17 March 1897).
join the upstart Wakefield group. For his part, Benjamin convinced Robert Fleming of the Riggs National Bank to serve as Treasurer and promised to acquire a map of Wakefield from the Coast Survey.  

On the evening of June 11, 1923, Rust held another meeting at her home. This time, seventeen “patriotic citizens” attended. To reflect the expansion of its membership and purpose, Rust changed the group’s name to the Wakefield National Memorial Association. Benjamin explained to the attendees that the Association sought to:

Preserve for all time the historical portions of Wakefield and to form a beautiful park of that portion and to build there a replica of the house in which Washington was born and a log cabin as emblematic of the home of the first settlers, linking up this park with the Government-owned Monument and Grounds and make of it a shrine to which Americans can go; but like Mt. Vernon under the care and direction of this Association.

Rust intimated that she had secured an option on portions of the site, including the Washington family’s burial vault and over fifty acres of land with rights of way. She had already raised $1,000, but needed the Association to raise an addition $11,000. Attorney Benjamin Minor offered to manage the legalities of land purchase. A unanimous vote authorized the appointment of a temporary committee to handle the Association’s business until regular officers could be elected. Satisfied with the evening’s events, Rust served dinner and, as the men smoked their cigars, she adjourned the meeting “assured that history has been made at this meeting.”

Even had it not, Rust was prepared to do everything possible to make it appear that way. Indeed, Josephine Rust was a master publicist. Her cause received an

---

61 Rust mentioned recruiting David Jayne Hill, James M. Beck, and David I. Blair. From the DAR she attracted Mrs. Lamas, Mrs. William Ruffin Cox, Miss Anne H. Wharton, Mrs. Morgan Smith, Mrs. Lars Anderson, and Mrs. Anthony Wayne Cooke. Minutes of the WNMA, 8 March 1923, FAC Records, RG 66, NAB. The Coast Survey was formed in 1807 and is the oldest scientific organization still active in the U.S.
62 Minutes of the WNMA, 1 June 1923, FAC Records, RG 66, NAB.
63 Ibid.
unanticipated boon when newspapers reported that President Calvin Coolidge had recently found himself stranded at Wakefield by a low tide during an autumn excursion there with his family.64 A site worthy of presidential visits certainly deserved presidential treatment and so Rust staged a grand spectacle by way of the Association’s first public meeting. On February 22, 1924, the Wakefield National Memorial Association convened in the Washington Memorial Continental Hall. John Barton Payne, Chairman of the American National Red Cross, presided (most likely at the request of Marcus Benjamin). The Marine Corps band belted out the “Stars and Stripes Forever” and the Episcopal Bishop of Washington, Reverend James E. Freeman, delivered the invocation.65 William Howard Taft, then Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, delivered an address, as did Ohio Senator Simeon D. Fess and Virginia Senator Claude Swanson. Virginia Representative Clifton A. Woodrum sang “Carry Me Back to Old Virginia” and the audience joined him for a round of “America.”66 Through all of it, the Association remained committed to its singular mission: “to restore and maintain for the use and inspiration of the people of the United States, “Wakefield”, the birthplace of Washington.”

Rust and her cohort mobilized their considerable connections toward ends beyond mere publicity. The Association elected Charles Moore, chairman of the U.S. Fine Arts Commission (FAC), as its vice president. Moore had shared leadership of the FAC with architect Daniel H. Burnham and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. back

64 Marling, George Washington Slept Here, 264-65.
65 Rust would have known him from her charitable work on the construction of the National Cathedral. Freeman was the Episcopal Bishop of Washington from 1923 to 1943 and is noted for his skillful fundraising and promotion of the National Cathedral. See “Episcopal Diocese of Washington, Past Bishops,” www.edow.org/diocese/bishops/pastbishops.html (accessed June 1, 2006).
66 From the “Programme” distributed during the Association’s first public meeting, Minutes of the WNMA, FAC Records, RG 66, NAB.
when it was established in 1910. In that capacity, he played an important role in shaping Washington’s public parklands.67 His involvement therefore made available to the Association the expertise of an entire cadre of prominent planners who, as we will see, did not always agree with the WNMA’s plans. Moore also provided an important avenue into governmental circles and lent clout to the project. He publicized the project through a host of articles including “The Pious Pilgrimage to Wakefield” in the September 1924 issue of The Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine that, in its title alone, demonstrates the persistence of object fetishism in the Colonial Revival sensibility.68

Rust’s considerable publicity skills and her ability to enlist prominent figures within the Association’s ranks enabled the group to raise $12,000 (about $130,000 today69) in three short years—enough to buy seventy acres of land surrounding the Government’s eleven-acre monument, rights of way therein, and fifty feet of land encircling the Washington family burial ground.70 All that remained was permission to take charge at the old government memorial. Again, the Association exercised its considerable connections and, in 1926, convinced New York Senator James W. Wadsworth, Jr. and Virginia Representative Schulyer O. Bland to introduce a bill in Congress granting the WNMA authorization to enact their plans.71 President Coolidge, fond of the good press politicians like himself drew from the cult of Washington and all things Colonial Revival, approved H.R. 10131 (Public Law No. 545) on June 7, 1926 and

69 This figure is adjusted for inflation according to the Consumer Price Index.
thereby granted the WNMA permission to "build...a replica of the house in which George Washington was born" on Federal property.\textsuperscript{72}

H.R. 10131 was as timely as it was problematic. Its approval fortuitously coincided with the run-up to national celebrations planned for the bicentennial of Washington's birth. Not since the days of the early republic had reverence for the esteemed first president reached such a fevered pitch.\textsuperscript{73} President Coolidge had signed the Washington Bicentennial Bill in December 1924, a congressional joint resolution that created the United States Commission for the Celebration of the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of George Washington. The bill initiated what Marling calls "the most glorious and all-encompassing hero-tribute in American history" and set its sights on February 22, 1932 as the official day of celebration. Led by U.S. Representative Sol Bloom—a veritable P.T. Barnum of governmental propaganda—the United States George Washington Bicentennial Commission saturated the country with Washingtonia for over a decade.\textsuperscript{74}

The Association eagerly anticipated the Bicentennial Bill and what it considered its implicit mandate for the commemoration of Washington's birthplace. Earlier that very year, the Commission's would-be vice chairman, Ohio Senator Simeon D. Fess, had addressed the Wakefield Association in Continental Hall and declared: "We cannot do anything better than make certain that the hallowed ground at Wakefield is not neglected."

\textsuperscript{72} Marling provides an excellent discussion of how politicians like Coolidge purposefully played on the rhetoric of the Colonial Revival in order to associate themselves with Washington and other heroes of republicanism. See Marling, \textit{George Washington Slept Here}, 257-71.

\textsuperscript{73} The U.S. Bicentennial Commission convinced eighty-one countries to observe the president's birthday. This resulted in, among other idiosyncratic monuments, a bust of Washington in Saigon and the dedication of \textit{Washingtonstrasse} in Germany. See Marling, \textit{George Washington Slept Here}, 329.

\textsuperscript{74} Marling, \textit{George Washington Slept Here}, 254-56. Bloom began his long career by securing a seat on the 1893 Chicago World's Fair Commission at age twenty one. For a fun and fascinating (though partially fictitious) account of this early phase of Bloom's career, see Erik Larson, \textit{The Devil in the White City} (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).
It is a shame and a disgrace that Washington’s birthplace is not a national shrine, and I will do all I can to make the efforts to the Wakefield National Memorial Association a success.” In December 1927, the Association wrote to the Commission to formally request that it use the proposed reconstruction of Washington’s birth house in connection with official celebrations. The Association argued that its “completed replica” would be a “logical starting-point of the two hundredth anniversary celebration—the center, the nucleus, from which will evolve and radiate celebrations throughout the land.”

The confidence evidenced by this request veils, however, a number of problems underlying the Association’s commemorative campaign. First off, the Association’s reputation had suffered a severe blow during the spring of 1928. In her round up of prominent members, Josephine Rust had convinced noted Washington family genealogist Charles A. Hoppin to serve as the Association’s historian. Hoppin consented, but almost immediately embroiled the Association in a long-standing dispute with the citizens of nearby Fredericksburg, Virginia concerning the location of Washington’s boyhood home. The people of Fredericksburg claimed that Washington’s boyhood home—where Parson Weems imagined him felling the cherry tree—overlooked the Rappahannock River just opposite of town. In articles published in 1925 and 1926, Hoppin suggested that Washington’s boyhood home had actually been located several miles distant from the town and the river. Despite credible arguments to the contrary, Hoppin did not recant and his case for a far-off boyhood home reached Fredericksburg in February 1928 when

---

75 Fess’s comments were published in the Washington Evening Star (23 February 1924).
76 “Concrete Proposals of the Wakefield National Memorial Association, Incorporated, to The United States Commission for the Celebration of the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of George Washington,” December 1927, FAC Records, RG 66, NARA.
77 See October 1925 edition of DAR quarterly and Charles Hoppin, “The House in which Washington was Born,” 74. Thanks to Paula S. Felder for sharing her research on Ferry Farm and Charles Hoppin.
the *Free-Lance Star* reported on its sway among Washington’s newspapers. Tempers peaked that March when, given increasing acceptance of Hoppin’s claim, the National Bicentennial Commission decided that Fredericksburg did not qualify to host official commission-sponsored celebration events.

It is unclear what Hoppin’s intentions were. He may have really believed Ferry Farm to be incorrectly located. It is possible that he also considered Fredericksburg’s courting of the Bicentennial Commission a threat to the WNMA’s chances of winning its favor. Regardless, his squabble resulted in bad press for the Association that translated into bad press for Josephine Rust—who abhorred nothing more. To make things worse, an anonymous letter to the Association threatened that if Hoppin did not retract his statements, a group of concerned citizens and a “very clever newspaper man” would:

Show by actual authority that the Wakefield Associations [sic] statement about the location is all wrong...I am told that Washington only lived at Wakefield about three years, and that the house which is now proposed is not a copy of anything but merely represents what someone thinks Wakefield might have looked like, and that the house will not occupy the spot on which George Washington was born, and that there is not a scintilla of documentary evidence to show the old ruins of the house in which Washington was born.

As we will see in chapter three, accusations of inaccuracy had reached uncomfortably wide circulation by 1928 and this threat surely concerned Rust, who had additionally received letters from Fredericksburg city commissioner C.B. Goolrick and resolutions by the Chamber of Commerce. Rust demanded answers from Hoppin but the genealogist

79 The *Free-Lance Star* (19 March 1928) argued that Hoppin’s denial of Fredericksburg’s claims to Washington’s birthplace “have been gaining acceptance by editorial writers across the county...until this question is settled, the Bi-Centennial Committee can do nothing to include the Washington boyhood farm in its plans.” This reference was provided in a Memorandum by Paula S. Felder, 10 April 2001.
80 Anonymous letter to undisclosed recipient, 22 March 1928, FAC Records, RG 66, NAB. The author also implies that the city will attempt to distract travelers away from Wakefield.
defended himself with a characteristically long-winded account of his reasoning, concluding that unlike his detractors’ claims:

Nothing in this work rests upon a popular belief, so-called tradition, cherry-tree stories, argument, or other Weemsian flotsam and jetsam which no court would admit as evidence and which real investigators of history have rejected; and for the same reason that patriotic societies do not admit members, or ancestral eligibility, upon such bases.81

Hoppin made clear his particular prejudices and demonstrated the extent to which the Wakefield project had grown into a contest for ownership of a very particular kind of past by spring 1928.

Records do not reveal what became of the Hoppin fiasco, but it is likely that his successful petition of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. for financial support represented a considerable step toward redemption. A second problem facing the Association by 1928 was its inability to raise enough money to ensure that it could in fact deliver on its ambitious plans. In July 1928, Hoppin took it upon himself to present Rockefeller with “a leather covered book containing, indexed, every available map, picture and other matter relating to Wakefield.”82 Rockefeller was concurrently engaged in the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, which made him the premier benefactor of historical preservation in the country at that time. Hoppin’s gift achieved the desired effect and Rockefeller’s land officer, Kenneth Chorley, purchased 267 acres of land adjacent to the birth site for $115,000. Rockefeller had the land placed in his River Holding Company for release to the WNMA on January 7, 1930 at which time he expected the group to have raised an equivalent purse through public subscription.83

81 Hoppin to Rust, 5 April 1928, FAC Records, RG 66, NAB.
82 Rust, “Wakefield National Memorial Association, Report of the President.”
Notwithstanding Hoppin’s escapades and the threat of financial shortfalls, the Association also struggled with problems created by its own enabling legislation. First, H.R. 10131 clearly stated that Congress expected the WNMA to build a “replica” of Washington’s birth home. This language bound the Association by legislative mandate to do something that was utterly impossible although Rust and others argued otherwise. As we will see in chapter three, the controversy surrounding whether or not the WNMA actually did build a replica lasted well into the 1940s and impacted park management well beyond. Secondly, H.R. 10131 sought to ensure the replica’s historical accuracy—its authenticity—by requiring advanced approval of all construction plans by both the FAC and the Secretary of War. The Association’s vice president, Charles Moore, just so happened to be an FAC commissioner thereby virtually guaranteeing the Commission’s approval. Winning over the War Department, however, proved to be another matter entirely.

The War Department, as of the early 1920s, never expressed any interest in modifying the landscape at Popes Creek. The WNMA’s arrival at Wakefield, however, put the War Department on the defensive. Even before the Association won its legislative mandate, the two organizations argued about appropriate commemoration. In 1925, for example, the Association vehemently criticized the War Department’s construction of a concrete access road, claiming that it compromised the historical integrity of Wakefield’s landscape. The Association’s legislative victory added fuel to the fire. Rust hired Washington, DC architect Edward W. Donn, Jr. in 1927 to draft plans for the so-called “Memorial House;” a rustic log cabin to honor the region’s first

---

84 Oculus, “Cultural Landscape Report,” vol. 1, 2.53.
European settlers; and for restoration of the Washington family burial ground. Secretary of War Dwight Davis, not to be outdone by a determined ladies association, dismissed Donn and indicated to Rust in a January 31, 1928 letter that the War Department would seek its own appropriation to hire an architect and devise its own plans for an improved memorialization schema. Davis secured an appropriation and an architect, but could not devise a plan affordable enough to compete with the Association’s public subscription drive or its promise of involvement from Rockefeller. Davis finally relented and, by 1929, the Association had more-or-less complete say at Wakefield. Secretary of War James W. Good formally approved the WNMA’s construction plans on April 30, 1930.86

Horace Albright’s ‘New’ National Park Service

Satisfying Rockefeller’s demand for matching funds proved far more difficult than Rust and her associates could have expected. The onset of economic collapse in 1929 all but dried up charitable donations. Despite a host of promotional pamphlets and post cards depicting the not-yet built Memorial House, the WNMA simply could not make ends meet through public subscription. Rust turned once again to Congress for assistance. Congressman Bland tried to push an appropriation bill through the House on

---

85 Donn previously worked on the restored Woodlawn plantation at Mount Vernon. Oculus, “Cultural Landscape Report,” vol. 1, 2.54. A map of proposed development commissioned by the WNMA in December 1927 attests to their grandiose expectations and includes a large airstrip adjacent to what is now Route 204 as well as a channel cut through Popes Creek to accommodate large vessels. See 1927 map in NPS Records 6/25, GEWA.
86 The War Department’s plans called for an exorbitant $450,000—an unlikely sum to be granted by Congress. For greater detail concerning Davis’ resistance to the WNMA, see Oculus, “Cultural Landscape Report,” vol. 1, 2.55-2.57. NPS Records 8/25, GEWA contains a variety of relevant correspondence between the WNMA and the War Department. Also see Beasley, “The Birthplace of a Chief,” 205-07; and Rust, “Wakefield National Memorial Association, Report of the President.”
87 NPS Records 6/26, GEWA contains examples of promotional efforts including a 1927 postcard depicting the future Memorial House and a pamphlet by Ella Loraine Dorsey titled “Restoration of Wakefield—Birthplace of Washington.”
behalf of the WNMA; Virginia Senator Claude A. Swanson followed suit in the Senate. But what should have been a simple legislative procedure encountered unexpected resistance by way of Michigan Representative Louis Cramton. Cramton blocked the bill in December 1930 ostensibly because he had discovered a painting that allegedly portrayed Washington’s “real” birth house. Charles Moore fumed over Cramton’s “blocking the Wakefield bill” and tried—to no avail—to convince him that, despite claims to the contrary, their were no extant paintings of the house that might suggest a design different than Donn’s. It was not the first time Cramton involved himself in congressional matters of preservation. He had opposed excessive development in the Grand Canyon as early as 1922. In 1925, Cramton engineered the very legislation responsible for the War Department’s restoration of the Custis-Lee Mansion in Arlington. Charles Moore had himself lent support to that effort, though four years later the two found themselves on different sides of a very different initiative. By all accounts, Cramton had distinguished himself as—in NPS historian John Ise’s words—“a valiant defender of park standards.”

Cramton’s opposition—based on a Richmond woman’s erroneous claim that she had a picture of the original house—was more than likely contrived as a favor for another aspiring preservationist, National Park Service Director Horace Albright. Horace Albright joined the NPS soon after U.S. President Woodrow Wilson signed the agency into existence by way of the Organic Act of 1916. Albright variously served as

---

88 S.R. 1784, 71st Congress.
89 Charles Moore to Virginia U.S. Representative R. Walton Moore, 23 December 1929, FAC Records, RG 66, NAB.
91 Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 473.
93 Charles Moore to Virginia U.S. Representative R. Walton Moore, 23 December 1929, FAC Records, RG 66, NAB.
superintendent of Yellowstone National Park and assistant director under the agency’s first director, Stephen Mather. Albright envisioned an expansion of the NPS’s mission to include protection of the nation’s historic resources. He and Mather had visited the War Department’s handful of eastern historic sites during the 1920s and found them lacking proper visitor facilities, procedural continuity, and a clear purpose and methodology. The NPS did possess, by 1929, a few of its own historic sites including the Petersen House in Washington, D.C. where Abraham Lincoln died. The Antiquities Act of 1906 had also ensured that the NPS be charged with protection of southwestern sites including ancient Indian ruins. But, as of 1929, the lion’s share of Federal historic sites belonged to the War Department. When Albright replaced Mather as NPS director in 1929, he immediately forced the issue by way of a proposed bill that called for all federal historic sites to be placed under the jurisdiction of the NPS. At the time, however, Albright did not have the support of the Director of the Department of the Interior and thus could not apply adequate leverage against the War Department during hearings before the House Military Affairs Committee.

Without support from above, Albright had no alternative but to acquire sites ad hoc with the hopes that the success of NPS stewardship would eventually impress Congress and win supporters to his cause. When Cramton caught wind of Senator Bland’s appropriation bill, he stepped in and created a first opportunity for Albright to put his plan into action. Coincidentally, his suggestion that the WNMA’s plans might not be entirely accurate resonated with Rockefeller who, like many by 1929, harbored serious doubts about the WNMA’s ability to ensure authenticity in their “replica.” W.A.R.

---

95 Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 469-72.
Goodwin—renowned originator of the Colonial Williamsburg restoration project—contacted Rust and urged her to undertake serious archeological investigations if she wanted to retain Rockefeller's support.\footnote{Ibid., 483.} When Bland's bill arrived on the House floor, Cramton argued that Rockefeller would only deliver on his end of the deal with some guarantee of authenticity. He proposed that only if the WNMA agreed to transfer its property to the NPS—an organization, according to Cramton, capable of ensuring Rockefeller's wishes—should Congress further fund the group's project. Cramton's congressional peers accepted his argument and the WNMA, faced with no other alternative but financial ruin, agreed to the bill.\footnote{The WNMA evidently worked in collaboration with the U.S. Bicentennial Commission to propose the appropriation bill that Bland and Swanson presented to Congress. See Rust, "Wakefield National Memorial Association, Report of the President."} With that, Congress appropriated $15,000 to relocate the 1896 granite obelisk and an additional $50,000 to support the WNMA's construction plans. Presidential approval on January 23, 1930 distributed the funds and formally established the George Washington Birthplace National Monument.\footnote{S.R. 1784, 71st Congress.}

In this way, Albright exercised considerable influence on the Monument's founding legislation. He knew the WNMA's plan to build a "replica" of Washington's birth home was bound to draw negative criticism. As of 1929, there remained no credible record of the original building's appearance. Moreover, as we will see in chapter three, archeological investigations sponsored by both the War Department and the WNMA raised suspicions concerning the location and physical orientation of the Memorial House. Still, Albright needed an opportunity to showcase his vision for a new historically-minded NPS. How better to do that than open a new park at Washington's birthplace in time to celebrate the general's 200th birthday? Better yet, the project was
already underway and paid for—the WNMA was eager to finish in time for Washington's bicentennial and Rockefeller's support made that very likely. For all of these reasons, Albright never questioned the WNMA's plans to build a replica house. Instead he publicized the project with fervor.99

That said, Albright did build a very important safeguard into the Monument's founding legislation. Senate bill 1784 did not immediately transfer the WNMA's property to the NPS. Instead, it provided financial support for the organization to build "a replica of the house in which George Washington was born" and for "restoring and improving the gardens and grounds...and erecting such other buildings as shall be deemed necessary." Upon completion of these tasks, "said building and all lands owned by the [WNMA] shall ...be conveyed to the United States as a gift for administration, protection, and maintenance."100 Up until that point, however, the NPS would not be responsible for any decisions concerning construction of the memorial landscape. This was a tricky and ethically questionable move. After all, Congress granted authority to create the park only after Cramton argued that the NPS would guarantee the quality of the work done there. That burden, however, ultimately fell to the FAC. Senate bill 1784 retained H.R. 10131's provision requiring the FAC to approve construction plans and additionally required approval by the Secretary of the Interior. So, although ultimate

100 This clause refers to the transfer of "said building." It is unclear whether "building" refers to all new construction or only to the Memorial House. Questions in later years concerning ownership of the Log House Tea Room and, to a lesser extent, the Colonial Kitchen may very well have resulted from the ambiguity of this legislation.
responsibility for the quality of the work done at Wakefield did lie in government hands, the NPS was in no way accountable for the historical integrity of the WNMA’s project.

**Cooperation and Conflict: Making Washington’s Birthplace, 1930-1932**

Despite these precautions, the amount of publicity surrounding the Wakefield project—especially following Charles Hoppin’s battle with Fredericksburg—left Albright and his assistant directors, Arno Cammerer and Arthur Demaray, leery about allowing the WNMA’s plans to unfold wholly unsupervised. Moreover, Albright had discovered that the WNMA’s receipt of donations from the Commonwealth of Virginia legally involved the Virginia Art Commission in planning decisions.\(^{101}\) Therefore, to ensure NPS supervision, Albright announced at an April 12, 1930 WNMA meeting that he had chosen NPS engineer O.G. Taylor—until then a resident engineer at Yosemite National Park—to provide the surveys necessary for Donn to create final construction drawings.\(^{102}\) The WNMA agreed to consult with Taylor, but Rust referred to him as a “liaison officer,” suggesting that she understood him to be more of a go-between than a planner.\(^{103}\) Whether Rust knew it or not, though, Taylor arrived with orders from Assistant Director Cammerer to ensure that the FAC did indeed approve the WNMA’s construction plans. Though eager to associate itself with historic preservation, the NPS was not willing to trade controversy for publicity (figure 9).

Donn had already made substantial progress on plans for the memorial landscape.\(^{104}\) He envisioned a cedar-lined approach to the monument leading to and

---

\(^{101}\) Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 485.

\(^{102}\) Minutes of the WNMA, 12 April 1930, FAC Records, RG 66, NAB.

\(^{103}\) Rust, “Wakefield National Memorial Association, Report of the President.”

\(^{104}\) See drawing “WAKEFIELD, showing development of the eleven acres owned by the government of the United States—suggested by Edward W. Donn, Jr., Architect,” 19 February 1929, Wakefield Files, FAC Records, RG 66, NAB. Donn’s drawing includes plans for the birth site, the log house, camping areas, a dock at Duck Hall, and his proposal for a lavish new base for the granite obelisk.
encircling the repositioned granite obelisk beyond which visitors would proceed to parking areas along the left side of the entry road. This plan placed the Memorial House, a colonial kitchen, and an ornamental garden just beyond the parking lot behind a brick wall enclosure. In a further elaboration of Donn’s vision, Rust noted that the WNMA desired a new base for the granite obelisk to replace the old “funeral [sic] design of the 1890s.” Moore agreed that, “the monument is of a design once used in cemeteries, but now generally regarded as inappropriate even for such uses. It is manifestly inappropriate to mark a birthplace.”

In addition to shaping ideas about how to appropriately remember a birth (see chapter one), Rust also indicated that the Memorial House was to be used as a museum and that the Colonial Kitchen would “contain the heating plant and other conveniences, and quarters for the caretaker.”

Construction commenced during the summer of 1930. James O. Caton & Sons moved the granite obelisk and re-cut its base and pedestal between August and December 1930. Given the technology available in 1930 and the remote location of the Monument, moving the granite obelisk presented a considerable challenge and the process became something of a local spectacle. Using nothing more than an enormous wooden derrick and human muscle power, workers gently lowered the massive obelisk

---

105 Charles Moore to Josephine Rust, 1 December 1927, NPS Records 6/26, GEWA.
107 S.R. 1784 provided $15,000 for removal of the granite obelisk, but it did not specifically make that money available to the WNMA. Therefore, it is likely that the War Department contracted directly with James O. Caton & Sons. See O.G. Taylor, “Condensed Report of Restoration Work to Date,” 10 September 1930, Wakefield files, FAC Records, RG 66, NAB. Oculus makes reference to the vague details of this operation in “Cultural Landscape Report,” n. 183, 2.59, especially with regard to the handling of the base pedestal and what is referred to as the “base extension stone.”
108 NPS Records 9/25, GEWA, contains all work descriptions and blueprints relevant to the relocation of the monument shaft and later curbing including blueprints illustrating new base configurations.

---

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
onto a series of greased logs and rolled it toward its new site. Using the derrick once again, workers raised the obelisk and repositioned it atop its new base.\footnote{109} The WNMA next turned its sites toward constructing the Memorial House. On December 12, 1930, Rust and associates contracted J.J. Jones and Conquest of Richmond, Virginia to construct the Memorial House and Colonial Kitchen at a cost of $45,000 (about $524,000 today).\footnote{110} Assistant Director Arthur Demaray convinced Rockefeller representative and Colonial Williamsburg notable, Kenneth Chorley, to lend the assistance of his brick makers.\footnote{111} Chorley agreed and sent contractors Todd & Brown, Inc. to Wakefield on July 8, 1930 where they erected a kiln adjacent to the building site and fired thousands of handmade native clay bricks.\footnote{112} The crew made more than enough bricks by November 20, 1930 and, thus supplied, builders worked throughout the year and completed construction of the Memorial House in the summer of 1931.\footnote{113}

Creating the memorial landscape occasionally sparked disagreements between the WNMA and the NPS.\footnote{114} Donn and Rust had planned from the beginning to include lodging facilities and a store on the Monument’s grounds. Landscape architect Charles

\footnote{109} Horace Albright visited Wakefield during the removal of the granite obelisk and videotaped portions of the work. Albright’s film is silent, but a recorded interview with one of the men who worked on the removal crew conveys some sense of the enormity of the task and the excitement generated by the project. See Albright Videotape, HMA-4 (Old Part #2), NPS Historic Photograph Collection, HFC. An anonymous undated (presumably mid-1970s) interview with a Mr. Combs is stored in the film projection room of the George Washington Birthplace National Monument Visitor Center and describes Combs involvement in the removal of the granite obelisk.

\footnote{110} This estimate is based on Consumer Price Index statistics.

\footnote{111} Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 485.

\footnote{112} Oculus, “Cultural Landscape Report,” vol. 1, 2.59-2.60.

\footnote{113} For a description of the brick-making process, see Taylor, “Report on Brick Making,” NPS Records, RG 79, NAB. Also see mention of the process in tribute to Mrs. Josepahine Wheelwright Rust presented by Dalton W. Mallory on the occasion of the unveiling of her portrait (presumably 1994) in NPS Records 9/25, GEWA. As with the removal of the granite obelisk, Albright filmed the brick makers at work. See Albright Videotape, HMA-4 (Old Part #2), NPS Historic Photograph Collection, HFC.

\footnote{114} NPS Records 9/25, GEWA contains descriptions of original landscaping, road work, fence construction, and 1931 contract with Davey Tree Experts.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Peterson—the first NPS landscape architect assigned to the eastern parks—became involved with the Wakefield project at Albright’s request and reluctantly approved the WNMA’s plans to build a lodge at Duck Hall. He was less willing to accept a store at the Memorial and considered the idea “startling” adding “it would be easy to do something terribly wrong with this building.” Peterson protested vehemently when the WNMA explained their plans to add a refreshment stand at the Memorial House:

Another matter that I feel very strongly about is that there should not be a refreshment stand at the mansion. If anyone cannot keep his insides wet between the four-fountain pavilion already built and the recreation center a few hundred feet away the doctors will not let him go out for a Sunday afternoon drive anyway. To set up a strawberry pop place would be merely creating a demand for something no more necessary than a penny arcade or a merry-go-round. The dignity of Washington’s Birthplace must be maintained at all costs. If the Park Service feels that the advertising value of a souvenir store is necessary, that is another matter, and does not involve competition with the Potomac River resorts that pander to the naïve instincts of the Sunday afternooner. I would think that a table or two in the mansion, the kitchen, or a small outhouse would take care of dispensing postcards and other articles of souvenir character. Then we would not have the smell of frying hamburgers, with or without onions, ice cream delivery trucks, and a row of garbage pails.

Peterson’s response achieved the desired effect and the WNMA eventually did surrender its plans for a concession stand at the Memorial House.

Peterson’s opinion of the WNMA pandering “to the naïve instincts of the Sunday afternooner” is unsurprising considering the even larger problem he contended with the previous year concerning the Park’s Colonial Garden. Recognizing that his concurrent responsibilities at Colonial National Monument preempted work at Wakefield, Peterson requested that the NPS assign another landscape architect to the project. The NPS transferred landscape architect V. Roswell Ludgate from the San Francisco office and in November 1930 Peterson asked him to research colonial gardens in order to design a plot

---

115 Peterson to Demaray, 26 June 1931, NPS Records 9/25, GEWA.
116 Peterson to Demaray, 11 August 1931, NPS Records 9/25, GEWA.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
to abut the Memorial House. Ludgate proposed that the Colonial Garden be divided into two sections filled with period-specific plants and surrounded by a brick walk and boxwoods believed to have been grown from cuttings taken from Popes Creek during Washington’s lifetime.\footnote{Oculus, “Cultural Landscape Report,” vol. 1, 2.61-2.62, n. 194, 2.62.}

Little did he or Peterson know that the WNMA already had very specific plans for the garden. The WNMA, in efforts to raise money to match the Rockefeller donation, had taken financial gifts from wealthy donors who hoped to associate their own names with the memorial landscape. For example, Rust explained in her June 1930 presidential report that “the four rooms on the first floor of the Birthplace have been taken as memorials.”\footnote{Rust, “Wakefield National Memorial Association, Report of the President.” Rust lists the recipients but does not indicate which rooms belonged to who: Jere Hungerford Wheelwright, by his son Jere Hungerford Wheelwright, Jr.; Mrs. William Ruffin Cox, by the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Virginia; Mary Ball Washington, by the Committee of the Northern Neck of Virginia; and Jane Barr Newton, by her great, great grandchildren Sara and Alice Worthington.} Wealthy donors—including the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Virginia—paid out substantial sums to have their names placed on brass plates affixed within rooms and, in some cases, on specific pieces of furniture. The entire state of Connecticut received a room on the second floor in thanks for the $5,000 contribution sent by Governor Trumbull in 1929.\footnote{Curiously, the Commonwealth of Virginia did not receive a memorial room despite Governor Byrd’s involvement in appropriating $5,000 for restoration of the burial ground and an additional $10,000 for construction of the memorial landscape. See Rust, “Wakefield National Memorial Association, Report of the President.”} Even the chimneys were dedicated to wealthy donors.\footnote{For donations of $2,000 Henrietta (Dawson) Ayres Sheppard secured a chimney for her parents Richard Johnson Ayres and Elizabeth Hack (Dawson) Ayres and Mrs. James W. Wadsworth, Jr. and her sister Mrs. Payne Whitney bought a chimney for their father, former Secretary of State John Hay.} Finally, Rust very specifically indicated that “Mrs. J.S. Moore and her children, Mrs. William Dusenberry Sherrard and Messrs. Moore, will restore the old-fashion flower garden.”
So, when Ludgate presented his plan at a November 1930 meeting, Rust spoke out in opposition. She returned several days later with WNMA member Mary Eva Moore Sherrard and an independent landscaper hired by the WNMA.\textsuperscript{121} Sherrard’s mother—Mary Smith Jones Moore—had died since paying for the privilege of restoring the “old-fashion flower garden,” but her daughter remained intent on fulfilling the memorialization. Specifically, Sherrard desired a prominent central location for a sundial erected in memorial to her own family. She suggested that “we could drop the idea and word ‘Colonial’ and conceive of a flower garden with seats placed where we could enjoy the central sundial put in as a feature...we would like to have the Sun-Dial in the center of a round plot with paths radiating from it.”\textsuperscript{122}

Peterson informed Albright of the situation and, clearly pushed beyond his willingness to compromise, the Director wrote directly to Rust determined to convey some sense of the NPS’s commitment to authenticity and historical professionalism:

I have just read the copies of your correspondence with Mrs. Sherrard, in regard to the garden at Wakefield. I am frank to say that they do not make me very happy. I feel that Mrs. Sherrard has the wrong idea in regard to this garden. She dismisses the sentimental side of the question with very few words and I don’t see how we can permit this to be done.

We are trying to put something in Wakefield that will be as nearly as possible what existed there when Washington was born. We are trying to follow the same general principles of landscaping that are being followed at Williamsburg. If we do anything less than this we are bound to receive criticism. I would be willing to leave out the vegetables for the time being, leaving that to be handled in the future, but the general principle of the garden ought to be carried out, leaving to the future the details. The thing that disturbs me more than anything else that Mrs. Sherrard said is that part of her statement—“above all we want the memorial tablet in a conspicuous place and we want a beautiful garden and not a sentimental one.” The underlining is mine. She seems to be more interested in memorializing Mary Smith Jones Moore than she is George

\textsuperscript{121} Ludgate to director, 17 Nov. 1930, in folder “D32 Landscaping,” NPS Records box 9 of 25, GEWA.
\textsuperscript{122} Sherrard to Rust, 12 April 1931, Wakefield files, FAC, RG 66, NAB.
Washington. Don’t you think we might let Mrs. Sherrard’s donation go by the board and try to raise the money elsewhere? Rust did offer to return Sherrard’s money and Sherrard supposedly accepted. By December 1931, work in the garden commenced according to Ludgate’s plan and included construction of a hand-hewn picket fence. Almost two years later, however, Sherrard remained “very bitter in her denunciation of the restored colonial garden” and superintendent Phillip Hough—who arrived at the Monument in 1932—echoed Peterson’s suggestion in a letter to WNMA interim president, Maude Worthington, that “in view of this apparent fundamental misunderstanding...would it not be well...to return Mrs. Sherrard’s donation and pursue the development of our garden in accordance with our approved plans and instructions.” Peterson understood the disagreement as a mandate to avoid future conflict and suggested that “the Landscape Division will have to place itself in the position of the earnest, but somewhat boorish prophets of Israel, who were continually predicting calamities.”

The Gendered Meanings of Authenticity

All of these disagreements demonstrate the presence of competing ideas about the function of historic objects. The Colonial Garden offers a perfect example. Had Peterson not been so busy prophesying, he might have recognized that his—and Albright’s—own shortsightedness really lay at the heart of the problem. Albright was wrong; Mrs. Sherrard did not have “the wrong idea in regard to this garden.” She did, however, have

---

123 Albright to Rust, 17 April 1931, NPS Records 9/25, GEWA.
124 See Oculus, “Cultural Landscape Report,” vol. 1, 2.63 and SMR, December 1931.
125 Hough to Worthington, 26 April 1934, NPS Records, Record Group 79, NACP.
126 Peterson to Albright, 27 April 1931, NPS Records 9/25, GEWA. Although the 1933 visitor’s guide promised a view “of many old fashioned herbs and plants such as were cultivated 200 years ago” the garden remained a ragged affair during its first years of operation. Planning disagreements between the NPS and the WNMA delayed serious efforts to create an accurate garden and, having only one growing season to mature, several plots remained uncultivated by 1933, drawing negative feedback from some visitors.
a very different idea than Albright and that difference involved fundamental ideas about
the relationship between people, objects, and the past. Sherrard, along with Rust and the
WNMA, deployed a theory of historical objects consistent with what had been a matter of
course for over a millennium. Just like the dollhouses of their childhoods, the curiosity
cabinets of their colonial forbears, and the memory theatres of early modern Europe, the
Memorial House and the Colonial Garden served the WNMA’s didactic ends by exposing
visitors to a purposeful ordering of historical objects. The lessons to be learned at
Washington’s birthplace—lessons about republican virtue, citizenship, motherhood, and
the importance of an appropriate upbringing—lie in the physical relationship of one
object to another.

Albright and Peterson also sought didactic ends, but unlike the WNMA, they
posited professionalism, objectivity, and authenticity as the means to those ends. Like
Fiske Kimball at Monticello, their penchant for authenticity typified the modus operandi
of an entire generation of new male museum professionals who, armed with university
degrees in history and new fields like landscape architecture, refuted women’s claims to
historical knowledge on the grounds that ladies associations lacked the ability and the
credentials to recognize an authentic past. And anything less than authenticity at a
historic site, as Albright informed Rust, was “bound to receive criticism” (from other
professional men, of course). This shift points to the emergence within the world of
historic house museums of divergent ways of remembering predicated on gender. What
the NPS failed to realize was that Rust and her Association were not bereft of knowledge,
but rather possessed an entire realm of knowledge specific to their experiences as women.
Their goal was never to replicate Washington’s birthplace as it once was, but rather to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
replicate there the relations of social and physical order they believed were responsible for nourishing Washington’s legendary character. For the WNMA, Washington’s birthplace had everything to do with birthing Washington and was therefore a monument to republican motherhood, its preservation, and women like themselves who carried on the tradition. To that end, the authenticity of the house and its furnishings—as far as the Association was concerned—was less important than the arrangement of chairs, beds, chests, and other markedly domestic objects that, when assembled appropriately, conveyed important meanings to visitors about the role of women in Washington’s life.

Evidence of this intent lies in the eagerness of other ladies associations to be remembered for their contributions to the Memorial House. The WNMA furnished the Memorial House in part by inviting other patriotic ladies associations to underwrite the purchase of expensive furniture and decorations. In return, the WNMA promised to publicly recognize contributors with a small plaque or inscription. The language used to negotiate these exchanges is remarkably precise and reveals volumes about how ladies associations understood the function of objects in house museums. WNMA regent Ida Sherman Jenne, for example, negotiated the state of Connecticut’s request to underwrite an entire bedroom. In a letter to Charles Moore, Jenne was very carefully to explain that “the room for the constitution state is to contain a fire place, a wing chair, a bed, a mirror, a bed stand, a chest, rugs, chairs, etc.” She continued:

I would like very much to have the Chest marked for myself, which was given with the money that my friends here in Hartford contributed for something to be given in my honor. I sent the inscription long ago, but will give it again just as the women wanted it to be marked “Presented in honor of Mrs. Clarence F.R. Jenne, Regent Connecticut Chapter, Wakefield National Memorial Association, by her friends in Hartford, Connecticut.” The other choice is I presume for the
Woman's Club of Greenwich, Connecticut, and I would like to have the Bed for their choice.\textsuperscript{127}

Jenne's desire to have the chest marked for herself and the bed marked for another ladies association reveals her understanding of those domestic objects as being significant symbols of the motherly acumen required to birth and raise a man like Washington. Again, not unlike a dollhouse, the Memorial House functioned like a theater of sorts that, when appropriately configured, would convey important messages about the centrality of motherhood to the success of the republic. Rust and the Wakefield ladies staked their commemorative right on their own mastery of the domestic sphere.

Transmission of those messages to visitors therefore relied less upon authenticity than on very old ideas about how humans experience the material world. The Colonial Garden fiasco is a case in point. Sherrard's plan for a circular garden with benches flanking a central sundial—itself a visual reminder of the passing of time—encouraged visitors to quietly reflect upon the lessons taught by the Memorial House. She deployed her knowledge of how gardens should be to best accommodate visitor expectations of a public memorial and to ensure that she herself would be remembered.\textsuperscript{128} Peterson, who sought to create the garden not as it should be, but rather as it once was, dismissed Sherrard's suggestion to "drop the idea and word 'Colonial'" as typical of women's inability to appreciate the importance of authentic re-creation. In actuality, Peterson was no better able to authentically re-create the Colonial Garden than the WNMA was; at that point, nobody had any idea what the place really looked like during the eighteenth century. Sherrard's informal knowledge of gardens and their social function constituted

\textsuperscript{127} Ida Sherman Jenne to Charles Moore, 12 May 1930, FAC Records, RG 66, NAB.
\textsuperscript{128} The widespread popularity of garden clubs during the first decades of the twentieth century—clubs with close ties to hereditary and patriotic ladies associations—certainly informed Sherrard's ideas about how a garden should be.
as viable a means toward instructing the public about the past as any interpretive method the NPS then had under its belt. In fact, Peterson's professional knowledge—a distinctly male knowledge—prevented him from understanding that the public, who had been so long nurtured on ancient strains of object fetishism, was in fact better prepared to understand the messages conveyed by the WNMA's careful ordering of objects than his own attempt to reclaim an irrevocably lost past. Albright and Peterson's all-consuming appetite for the authentic object—a fetishization of authenticity itself—blinded them to the utility of longstanding beliefs about humans and things, a variety of knowledge increasingly thought of as the domain of women.

Similar differences spurred conflict over the WNMA's renovation of the Washington family burial ground. The WNMA initially sought to create a tomb at the burial ground reminiscent of the tomb at Mount Vernon; Moore envisioned circular brick paths and dense plantings surrounding the gravesites. By 1930, Donn had formulated the "sarcophagus like tomb" plan visible today and, between 1930 and 1931, he directed the removal of the concrete and cement work added by the Colonial Dames in 1906 and re-set the two original gravestones behind the original burial vault. William A. Gault & Son, Inc. of Baltimore, Maryland, excavated the area prior to restoration and made detailed drawings of thirty-two gravesites, twenty of which lay outside of the vault and some beyond the walled enclosure. The Association's old friend and supporter, Bishop Freeman, led the recommitment services that, in a dramatic flourish of medieval fetishism, witnessed the remains of these bodies—"each in a silk bag tagged with a silver label bearing the coordinate measurements of the original location"—replaced in the

---

vault restored with original bricks reclaimed from the site.130 Gault & Son covered the vault with a three thousand pound lid and added a new Aquia freestone table stone on April 27, 1931.131 A new wall, built with bricks left over from construction of the Memorial House, enclosed the grave site and opened onto a gravel path stretching between the burial ground and the approach road along attractively landscaped grounds (figure 10).

All the while, the NPS landscape division had developed its own plans for renovation of the burial ground. Rust requested a copy of the NPS’s plans and Peterson requested a copy of the WNMA’s plans in November 1930. For whatever reason, Peterson did not comment on the WNMA’s plans until April 1931, well after work had begun on the burial ground site. In a letter to Albright, Peterson expressed his concern about the “advisability of placing this extremely formal plan out by itself in the middle of a Virginia corn field.”132 Moore heard about Peterson’s criticism and himself wrote to Albright claiming that the WNMA’s plans reflected typical graveyards of the colonial period. Peterson remained suspicious—especially given that this very same argument allowed construction of what he considered a highly suspect Memorial House (see chapter three)—and dispatched Ludgate to photograph “any additional colonial burying grounds” to determine exactly what was typical of the period.

As it turns, Peterson misunderstood the WNMA’s intent. He assumed that the WNMA intended all reconstructive work at Wakefield to resemble as best as possible the landscape as it appeared during the life of George Washington. Their real intent,
however, was never to carefully replicate lost buildings and landscapes, but rather to recreate meanings once conveyed by their historical relationship—to recreate the relations of order responsible for the conditions in which Washington was born and ultimately ascended to greatness. The opposing camps eventually agreed at a meeting on May 11, 1931 to minimize the grand planting scheme originally envisioned by the WNMA. They never managed, however, to understand the real roots of their commemorative differences.

Washington’s Birthplace National Monument as a Legacy of Difference

And, as it turns out, the NPS would never have an opportunity to fully resolve its differences with Rust’s WNMA. On June 26, 1931, four days after the WNMA voted to turn over all of its property to the United States per its granting legislation, Josephine Rust died. Her death stunned both organizations. Rust had been, from the beginning of the project, its primary figurehead and most aggressive fundraiser. Most importantly, her particular ideas about commemoration created the context in which a long battle for ownership of the past has played out at Washington’s birthplace. And, beyond the birthplace, Rust’s impact and the example of Washington’s birthplace set the stage for Albright’s expansion of the NPS’s historic sites program. Despite questions concerning the Memorial House’s authenticity, Washington’s birthplace opened to widespread interest and its considerable success bolstered Albright’s arguments for expansion of the NPS’s historical site holdings. In 1931, he hired the agency’s first historian, Verne

---

133 See Oculus, “Cultural Landscape Report,” vol. 1, 2.69-2.70 for summary of these events and citations of relevant correspondence.
134 Rust died at age 67 and was buried in Rock Creek Cemetery, Washington, D.C. She was survived by her husband, Harry lee Rust (who died in 1938), sons Harry Lee, Jr. and Gwinn Wheelwright, three grandchildren, and her sister, Eleanor Hungerford Wheelwright. Mallory, “Mrs. Josephine Wheelwright Rust,” 5243.
Chatelain, who brought order to Albright's vision and put forth an interpretive thematic structure that still resonates in NPS policy today. That vision found favor with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and Albright won his battle to expand the NPS's historical stewardship in 1933 when Executive Order 6166 transferred administration of all Federal historic sites to the NPS. The Birthplace thus played a prominent role in the agency's expansion of focus during the 1930s.

Even so, that important role unfolded amid tense differences between two organizations vested in very different ideas about the past. From the beginning of their relationship, the WNMA and the NPS sought different commemorative ends. Horace Albright's NPS hoped to offer up Washington's birthplace as an example of how Federal historic sites could educate the public about the nation's history. Josephine Rust and the WNMA were also committed to education, but of a very different sort and with a very different message than Albright had in mind. The Wakefield ladies fancied themselves the surrogate mothers of republican virtue at a time when concerns about preserving pure American values ran rampant. They staked their commemorative ideal—as had George Washington Parke Custis before them—in the relic value of Washington's birthplace and members spoke with an almost religious fervor about the importance of bringing visitors into physical communion with the place. That the WNMA kept its membership records in what they called the "golden book" is telling in this regard and variations on religious themes are common throughout its narratives of struggle and accomplishment leading to the construction of the Memorial House. Rust's sudden death upon completion of the project surely bolstered these spiritual overtones.
In fact, misunderstandings between the WNMA and the NPS often resulted from the latter's inability to recognize that the WNMA sought not only to commemorate Washington; it sought to publicly commemorate itself. We have already seen one example of this with the Colonial Garden and Rust's promise of its design to Mrs. William Dusenberry Sherrard. Rust's death heightened the desire for self-commemoration. Eulogies delivered by association members conveyed a sense of messianic reverence. WNMA Vice President Maude Worthington proclaimed that "the establishment of this great American Shrine will remain forever a tribute to her undaunted courage and unalterable faith in the maintenance of historic truth." Many shared Worthington's desire that the Birthplace be somehow publicly attributed to Rust although NPS planners resisted diverting attention away from Washington.

Westmoreland Country designed its own museum and library after the Memorial House in 1939 and dedicated it in honor of Josephine Rust (figure 11). Despite this consolation, the WNMA never managed to convince NPS planners of the importance of honoring Rust at Wakefield. Their pleas should not, however, be disregarded as trivial. The WNMA's desire to honor itself was, in essence, a desire to write women back into a history so-long crafted by men.

In the confusion proceeding Rust's sudden death, work continued at the Monument. The WNMA had yet to construct its log lodge at Duck Hall and the NPS had not even begun to build the offices, houses, and physical infrastructure required by a staff and superintendent and, most importantly, the visiting public. Recently appointed

135 Mrs. C.C. Maude R. Worthington quoted in Hoppin, Some Descendants, 146.
136 The county built the museum specifically to house a portrait of William Pitt it had commissioned in 1768 by none other than Charles Willson Peale—in this way Peale returns to our story but only by coincidence. The museum building closely approximates the Memorial House in basic design, size, and materials and is located about ten miles southeast of Wakefield in Montross, VA.
superintendent Philip Hough arrived on February 16, 1932 just in time to celebrate Washington’s birthday. Damage incurred during an unusually harsh Virginia winter occupied the new superintendent’s first days on the job but, having previously served at Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Hough was no stranger to rough weather and reveled in the otherwise exciting atmosphere at the Birthplace.

And 1932 was nothing if not an exciting year in Virginia’s Northern Neck. The hoopla caused by Sol Bloom’s bicentennial commission created needed diversions for a rural community hit hard by depression. NPS Assistant Historian Elbert Cox captured the spirit of the times in a 1932 issue of the agency’s publication, Historical Notes:

In this year, the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of George Washington, it is difficult to read, to write, or to travel over the country without seeing repeated references to that name. Billboard advertisements, tourist information folders, newspaper articles, and magazine stories take some incident from his life for a theme...One of the greatest opportunities that this bicentennial year of his birth offers is to give to this much written and spoken about man some of the qualities of a living personality...[an] indication that this year will show some real results toward giving reality to a traditional Washington is an emphasis that has been evident for some years; namely, an effort to preserve and to interpret places that were important in the life of Washington. True, some places are advertised for purely commercial reasons and perhaps some are made the basis for historical claims that have no basis in actual fact. But the travels of Washington were extensive, and his life so active that there are any number of places of real historical importance in the story of his life...It is significant to note that two places, his birthplace and the site of his greatest military victory, are set aside in national monuments, owned and administered by a bureau of the federal government for the benefit and enjoyment of the people. At George Washington Birthplace National Monument the restoration of the long-neglected old Wakefield estate will picture for the visitor the birthplace of more than two hundred years ago.

137 In a 1950 letter to NPS Director Newton Drury, Louise du Pont Crowninshield spells Hough’s name “Hoff” suggesting a probable pronunciation of the Superintendent’s last name. See Crowninshield to Drury, 10 January 1950, NPS Records 8/25, GEWA.
138 SMR, February 1932, NPS Records, GEWA.
139 The second place, “the site of his greatest military victory,” was and remains at Yorktown, Virginia where the NPS supervises Colonial National Monument. Elbert Cox, “Virginia Editorial” in Historical Notes 6:2 (March-April 1932), 1-2.
The George Washington Birthplace National Monument thus promised to recreate for the country the scene of its most beloved hero’s birth. And as we will see in the following chapter, fulfilling that promise would prove more difficult than almost anyone could have predicted in 1932. What at that time most captivated a nation still fascinated with George Washington, though, was not authenticity, but rather the opportunity to visit a place “of real historical importance in the story of his life”—a real twentieth century loci sanctorum. Although the site’s historical significance remains up for debate, the Monument’s creators unwittingly preserved in the Birthplace’s contested landscape a fascinating glimpse into the varieties of twentieth-century memory.
CHAPTER III
BUILDING X

The story of Washington’s birthplace is a story about competing memories and how questions about authenticity are framed when ownership of the past is contested. As we have seen in the previous two chapters, ownership of the past can be exerted through the purposeful manipulation and creation of historic and historical objects. The struggle for it can also unfold within the oppositional context of competing knowledges including the public performance of gender. Josephine Wheelwright Rust, following the example of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association and other colonial revivalists, created remarkable opportunities for her ladies association to write itself into the story of George Washington. Rust’s untimely (or, perhaps, perfectly-timed) death made her a martyr for the Association’s cause, especially—as with the Colonial Garden—when the NPS and its ranks of professional men threatened to derail the Association’s commemoratory vision. Accordingly, Rust herself has been commemorated throughout the Monument’s history as in 1932 when the WNMA named their Log House Tea Room after her and as recently as 1994 when her portrait was unveiled during a public ceremony at the Park.

Yet, among the various posthumous praise for Rust, we find evidence of concern regarding her motivations. In a eulogy of sorts penned shortly after Rust’s death, Charles
Hoppin referred to the Monument's 1926 granting legislation (H.R. 10131) as her "creed, her guide":

What she did was based upon it, consistent with it. Mrs. Rust departed this life believing that she had kept faith with it, fulfilled the vital requirement of it. Fulfilled it, she had. Nothing can gainsay that now. Nothing much else matters. Justice requires the acknowledgment of it.¹

To modern eyes, Hoppin's "it" refers to H.R. 10131. But, at the time, anyone involved with the Wakefield project would have understood that Hoppin's reference to "it," more specifically referred to H.R. 10131's requirement that the WNMA construct a replica of Washington's birth house at Popes Creek. By 1932, the one question on everyone's mind was whether or not the Memorial House was really a replica and, if not, who was to blame? Hoppin was determined to make clear that Rust went to her grave firmly believing that she had re-created George Washington's birth house brick for brick.

Others were not so sure. This chapter chronicles the events leading to and surrounding this particular crisis of authenticity at Washington's birthplace.

But, before we attempt to tease apart the varied threads of historical reality at Washington's birthplace, it is useful to raise an important, if seemingly obvious question. Why did Rust and the WNMA want to replicate George Washington's birth house in the first place? We have, in fact, already begun to answer this question. I argued in chapter one that the WNMA pursued a commemorative path consistent with a millennia-old tradition of object fetishism. Period rooms and historic house museums constituted just one instance of a much longer trajectory of historical representation predicated on the careful manipulation and use of historic objects. Additionally, as shown in chapter two, Rust and her colleagues relied upon the connotative powers of a human-scaled dollhouse

¹ Hoppin, Some Descendants, 148. The italics are mine.
to assert the significance of women in a past increasingly owned and operated by professional men. Within Rust’s commemorative lexicon, what was “replicated” at Wakefield was not necessarily the architectural minutiae of a vanished structure, but rather what was believed to be the relational topography of young Washington’s domestic world.

Rust’s impulse to replicate must also be understood as a reaction to events then unfolding just miles south of Washington’s birthplace. John D. Rockefeller’s reconstruction of Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia during the late 1920s and 1930s captured the country’s imagination and surely delineated what Rust and her associates considered within the realm of possibility for their own project.2 And Colonial Williamsburg did suggest that a great deal was possible. What distinguished Colonial Williamsburg from other contemporary replicative endeavors like Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village near Dearborn, Michigan was its expressed commitment to material and contextual authenticity. Where Ford collected objects and buildings from afar and assembled them into an idealized historical pastiche, Rockefeller promised to undertake a one-to-one restoration of a complete eighteenth-century town in situ. Numerous scholars have demonstrated how Rockefeller’s commitment to authenticity was blind to the realities of eighteenth-century life, especially regarding race and class difference.3 But, even though Colonial Williamsburg projected a sanitized and markedly whitewashed vision of the past onto its referent, the effort to build that simulacrum simultaneously

---


gave rise to and derived authority from an unprecedented foray into the then very new field of historical archeology.

Historical archeology, unlike traditional archeology, which studies the artifacts of pre-historic life, is concerned with the material remains of modern cultures. As practiced in the United States, “modern” generally refers to the years following European discovery and settlement of North America. During the 1930s, archeologists were only beginning to learn how to recognize post holes and trash pits as evidence of impermanent colonial architecture. That kind of expertise came at great cost in those days. Although Rockefeller could afford experts, fledging groups like the WNMA certainly could not. Neither could the NPS who had, until then, confined its archeological investigations to the prehistoric substrata of the southwestern parks. So, by the late 1930s, when the NPS first started differentiating between historical and archeological resources in its park management manuals, it was too late to stop the proliferation of anachronistic commemorations based on the discoveries of archeologists who were not equipped to understand the subterraneous traces of recent history.4 At Valley Forge, for example, between 1905 and 1946 various patriotic and hereditary societies had constructed log huts allegedly replicating those erected by Washington’s men in 1777. Although some of the huts were based on cursory archeological investigations, none of them looked alike and every one claimed to be an exact replica.5 So, when the NPS became involved at Valley Forge, rooting out idiosyncrasy became a formidable task.

---

4 By 1937 the NPS recognized at least some difference between history and archeology—a survey of park resources issued that year inquires about “historical and archeological data” (italics are mine). See Ethan Carr, *Wilderness by Design, Landscape Architecture and the National Park Service* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 274.

But nowhere more than at Washington’s birthplace did the NPS realize the pitfalls of unsound archeology. As we will see, the WNMA put forth a particularly dubious brand of “archeology” as evidence regarding the location and form of its replica Memorial House. Over time, and as it became evident that the Association had built its replica in the wrong place, the group defended itself in part by denying the legitimacy of archeological data as historical evidence. In this chapter and the next, I will explain that mistake and its long-term implications. We must be careful, though, to not dismiss the WNMA as just another stubborn group of amateur historians. Rather we must seek to understand what exactly was at stake at Wakefield for the Association and why small differences in how we go about remembering the past can make such significant differences to those who tell the stories.

It is also important that we respect the WNMA’s commitment to its own sense of historical propriety. Despite the examples of Colonial Williamsburg and Greenfield Village, remaining so firmly committed to replication was no small feat during the early twentieth century. Colonial revivalists had been reviled by intelligentsia on both sides of the Atlantic ever since the last decades of the nineteenth century. American luminaries including Mark Twain ridiculed re-creationists. Nathaniel Hawthorne exclaimed in 1856 that “nine tenths of those who seem to be enraptured by these fragments [antiques and museum pieces], do not really care about them.” American writers’ ill-feelings toward heritage devotees escalated into the next century as historical tableaux became a favorite focus of popular illustration and painting. Edith Wharton called colonial antiques and reproductions “travesties”; William Dean Howells trivialized them in his work; and

---

Henry James festooned historical site curators in a story with special relevance to our topic, “The Birthplace.” Friedrich Nietzsche went so far as to diagnose the entirety of Western society with “a malignant historical fever.” And in Virginia, where today Civil War reenactments are a matter of course, the 1930s witnessed opposition to battle reenactments at Manassas that demonstrated how “we have become a people that for some reason want entertainment which thrills, no matter how the thrill comes or what are the results on moral principles.” In this light, Rust’s investment in replication threatened to invite ridicule and possibly resistance. Her willingness to accept that risk is significant and bespeaks strong commitment to a particular way of remembering.

Then again, it is doubtful that any amount of ridicule would have rattled a group as convinced of its own purpose as was the WNMA. After all, Rust and her cohort sought to commemorate the most commemorable of all Americans, George Washington. Who could dispute their purpose, especially amid the atmosphere of celebration surrounding his two hundredth birthday in 1932? Moreover, a replica birth home was the only kind of memorial that would allow Rust and her cohort to express the full significance of women and domestic relations for safeguarding republicanism. The government’s granite obelisk certainly did not do Washington justice and, as a monument to domestic history, all but obliterated the role of women with its imposing phallic totality. Finally, what better than a grand Colonial Revival building to reconcile Wakefield’s rural modesty with the grand legacy of its favorite son? The Memorial House attempted to span the rift between touristic expectation and environmental reality.

at Washington’s birthplace, though in a way increasingly frowned upon by a new breed of male museum professionals popping up in organizations like the National Park Service.¹⁰

The WNMA’s unflagging commitment to George Washington’s birth, its highly symbolic investment in historic objects, and its resistance to the NPS’s commemorative agenda all smack of a holy crusade. In fact, we might argue that the WNMA’s ultimate goal at Wakefield was to create a shrine, with all the religious associations that word implies. To that end, Dean MacCannell’s classic account of modern tourism, The Tourist (1976), helps us place the WNMA’s work at Wakefield into a broader cognitive context. MacCannell, who is also interested in the similarities between modern commemoration and the medieval tradition, argues that “massive institutional support” is necessary to elevate a common site or object to the status of tourist attraction.¹¹ He calls this process “sight sacralization”¹² and, as with other historic sites and national parks, we see the process play out at Washington’s birthplace.

The first stage of sight sacralization, the naming phase, occurs when a sight is marked and set aside for examination or special appreciation. Custis clearly set the naming phase into motion at Popes Creek in 1815. First Virginia and then the Federal

¹⁰ Aaron Santesso argues that John Milton’s birthplace achieved the status of minor spectacle in early nineteenth-century London because it implied an unexpected relationship between author and place. Visitors did not expect to find a great author’s birthplace nestled in amid London’s urban squalor. The deviation between their lofty expectations and the actuality of Milton’s birth was startling because it compromised an emergent modern sensibility predicated on what Foucault calls the clinical gaze, a site-specific non-literal extraction of immediate sensory data. Santesso argues that it is exactly the rift between expectations and actually at Milton’s birthplace that heralded a new kind of literary tourism in the nineteenth century. For a good quick history of the grand tour in Europe its role in the development of a touristic gaze, and the problem of tourists desiring to exercise visual mastery over historic sites, see Santesso, “The Birth of the Birthplace,” 384-85.


¹² MacCannell’s use of “sight” rather than “site” refers to anything worth seeing, just as we see sights on a sight-seeing tour. Historic sites, as I refer to them, are just one of many types of sights.
government took up the work when it realized that Custis's marker had fallen by the wayside. The erection of a much larger marker—the granite obelisk—fulfilled the second phase of sight sacralization, the framing and elevation phase. In this phase, the sight is surrounded, protected, and mnemonically enhanced by a framing device. The War Department's obelisk served to mark the site of Washington's birth, but it also—by merit of its size and aesthetic solemnity—endowed the site with an aura of grave importance. The obelisk heightened the site's function as a loci sanctorum.

MacCannell's third stage, enshrinement, occurs when the framing material introduced in phase two itself enters the first stage of site sacralization. Although the granite obelisk never became the object of heightened adoration, over time it did serve to eliminate any doubt concerning the original location of Custis's first stone. Because Custis's makeshift marker yielded rather quickly to the ravages of time and relic seekers, nobody was absolutely sure of its precise location when the Federal government set out to build its obelisk at Popes Creek. Moreover, who knew if Custis marked the correct spot in the first place? Over time, though, these questions subsided beneath the obelisk's visible expression of commemorative authority. So, when the WNMA arrived, Rust had no doubt in her mind that the obelisk must mark the site of Custis's first stone and, consequently, the site of Washington's birth. The obelisk therefore enshrined a particular spot at Popes Creek despite earlier concerns regarding its veracity.

Enshrinement thus allowed the WNMA to embark upon the fourth phase of sight sacralization: mechanical reproduction. The Memorial House is an example of mechanical reproduction par excellence, an attempt to replicate in whole a bygone object. MacCannell tells us that "it is the mechanical reproduction phase of sacralization that is
most responsible for setting the tourist in motion on his journey to find the true object.”
The Memorial House did just that, it piqued widespread interest in the “true” house that,
though lost forever, remained in part within the foundations beneath the Memorial House.
Or, so everyone thought. By 1932, it seemed increasingly likely that perhaps Rust had
not, as Hoppin insisted, “fulfilled the vital requirement” of H.R. 10131. As we will see,
evidence that the WNMA’s aggressively sacralized Memorial House did not in fact frame
the true object—and that the true object was floating free well outside the WNMA’s
complex web of signification—put an abrupt halt to the process of sight sacralization
thereby crippling the Monument’s ability to make sense of itself.

Early Archeology and Initial Concerns

My purpose in this chapter, then, is to explain why the WNMA failed to carry
their Memorial House through the full cycle of sight sacralization. To do that, I must
return us briefly to the late nineteenth century. Ever since Secretary of State Evarts
journeyed down the Potomac in 1879, the presumed location of Custis’s long vanished
commemorative stone near the ancient brick chimney had come to be accepted as the site
of Washington’s birth. The Department of State had dispatched a civil engineer named
F.O. St. Clair to Popes Creek between 1881 and 1882 to explore the spot. In this very
early instance of Federally-funded historical archaeology, St. Clair was instructed to
determine “the character of the sub-strata” at Washington’s birthplace.\(^\text{13}\) Unfortunately,
records of his investigation do not exist, but correspondence suggests that St. Clair had

\(^{13}\) Hatch, *Popes Creek Plantation*, 71. Hatch cites Hoppin, “The House in Which George Washington was
Born,” 100.
uncovered little more at Wakefield than "pieces of china, hinges and a candle...a silver
teaspoon...[and] a bunch of keys."14

St. Clair's probing did, however, grab the attention of neighbors John Wilson and
R.J. Washington, both of whom were surprised to discover what St. Clair was up to. On
May 5, 1881, the two wrote to the new Secretary of State, James G. Blaine, and protested
that "this chimney was never a part of the original building; and is 45 to 50 feet from the
nearest point of the foundations of the old mansion."15 Blaine turned a deaf ear to Wilson
and Washington, relying instead on Evart's belief that the old chimney marked the true
spot and that the sixty-foot-square parcel transferred by Lewis Washington to the
Commonwealth of Virginia in 1858 did indeed outline the foundations of the original
house.16

This minor controversy notwithstanding, St. Clair doubted that the small parcel of
government land at Wakefield could support a monument befitting Washington. On
March 12, 1882 he suggested to yet another new Secretary of State, Frederick F.
Frelinghuysen, that the government acquire either an additional eleven acres and a
hundred-foot right-of-way to Bridges Creek or a three hundred square foot parcel around
the presumed birth site and a fifty-foot right-of-way. Frelinghuysen went half way and
authorized an eleven-acre expansion with a fifty-foot right of way. The government
purchased twenty-one acres from Wilson on July 10, 1883 thus giving them just over

14 David Rodnick, "Orientation Report on the George Washington Birthplace National Monument,
Westmoreland County, Virginia," report prepared for the National Park Service, October 17, 1941, HFCA,
15 Rodnick, "Orientation Report," 26; and cited in Hatch, Popes Creek Plantation, 72. This also discussed
16 See Beasley, "The Birthplace of a Chief," 202; and Hatch, Popes Creek Plantation, 72. Hatch indicates
that no Federal records remain documenting "how this suggestion was handled."
eleven acres surrounding the birth site and the right of way.\textsuperscript{17} Still, without ready access to the remote rural site, work stalled until February 25, 1893 when Congress appropriated the necessary funds to build a wharf on the Potomac River. That appropriation also granted the War Department authority to construct its commemorative granite obelisk.

Two years later, the Army Engineer Corps dispatched Colonel John M. Wilson to Wakefield with orders to supervise construction of a granite obelisk in honor of George Washington. Wilson worked alongside Captain John Stewart of the Bureau of Public Parks and Grounds who was charged with undertaking archeological investigations preceding construction of the monument.\textsuperscript{18} Stewart’s work only complicated questions concerning the shape and orientation of the original house. Unlike St. Clair, Stewart actually did dig and he did so at the center of the original sixty-square-foot Lewis Washington tract, the spot popularly believed to be where Custis placed his memorial stone in 1815. What Stewart discovered there did not resemble anything reminiscent of a wealthy landowner’s home. Instead, Stewart uncovered a two-room brick foundation approximately thirty-feet long and twenty-feet wide. The foundation suggested a building oriented along an east-west axis (figure 12).\textsuperscript{19}

It did not, however, reveal what collective local memory recalled and expected to be a much larger building. The War Department evidently felt compelled to apologize publicly for the lackluster discovery because, as historian David Rodnick later observed, “the excavation in 1896 must have surprised many of the people in that neighborhood…

\textsuperscript{17} Hatch, \textit{Popes Creek Plantation}, 72.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Beasley, “The Birthplace of a Chief,” 202-203. Beasley notes that “Stewart made only two maps of his excavations, with no mention of any associated artifacts.” Also see Hatch, \textit{Popes Creek Plantation}, 73-74.
rumors...rose later that the monument was placed on the wrong site."\(^\text{20}\) Still the government persisted with its plans and John E. Wilson once again protested in an October 4, 1898 letter that “Captain Stewart [did not succeed] in uncovering all of the foundations:”

About the fronting of the house—the only land approach was from the west—Popes Creek and one of its arms cutting off all access from the other three directions. The foundations of a double chimney at the west end seem to prelude [sic] the supposition that was the front. If it fronted north it would look across an arm of Popes Creek toward the dwelling place one-half mile off of a family of Wicklifs who emigrated to Kentucky about the close of the last century. Looking toward the south is a large expanse of level ground, the present fertility of which shows the effect of old manuring and the presence to this day of bulbs of several varieties of flowering plants, seem to indicate that the garden and orchard were in that direction.\(^\text{21}\)

This exchange reveals that Wilson deployed his knowledge of local history, landscape, and habitation patterns in hopes of rectifying possible mistakes made by an outsider operating under markedly non-local assumptions. But again, despite Wilson’s misgivings, the government continued with its plans and erected its granite obelisk atop what ‘official’ memory held to be the exact site of Washington’s birth. The decision to do so would resonate in shrill echoes for over a half century to come.

**The Memorial House: A Replica by Any Other Name**

Local grumblings concerning the location and orientation of Washington’s birth house quieted once the government built its monument and the War Department eased into an uneventful tenure at Popes Creek. All that changed, though, when the WNMA arrived during the early 1920s with its plans for a replica house. Now, in addition to old questions about location and orientation, problems of appearance and form emerged. Although the Association planned to build at Wakefield an exact replica of the house,

\(^{20}\) Cited in Hatch, *Popes Creek Plantation*, 75.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., n. 66, 82.
nobody knew what the original house looked like. The Association’s historian, Charles Hoppin, could not find any documentation of the building’s structural characteristics, location, or orientation and admitted as much in 1926: “No picture of it [the house] or any part of it, and no list of anything that was in the house, indicative of either the size, style or character of the house, has ever been published, or in any way authentically presented in this country.”

In fact, it appears that Hoppin’s interest in documenting the Washington family home had less to do with accuracy than it did with his long-standing grudge against Benson J. Lossing whose *Field Book of the Revolution* (1859) portrayed a humble home for America’s first family:

> It must be a house of ten or twelve rooms, of two stories in height, with an ell, and, probably, not much dissimilar or smaller than Gunston Hall...Better no structure at all than to build a replica of that utterly discredited and hopelessly inadequate Lossing-picture cottage, aforesaid, which unfortunately has been put forth of late as representing Wakefield.

Hoppin’s tirade, aside from betraying his ill disposition and his distaste for Lossing, demonstrates an undercurrent of architectural snobbery that no doubt buoyed the Association’s belief that George Washington could not have been born in anything less than an imposing brick mansion. Still, by 1926, the WNMA had no evidence to corroborate their plans other than local lore and the presumed site of Custis’s first stone.

The situation particularly concerned Fine Arts Commissioner (FAC) Charles Moore—WNMA vice president at the time—who, by order of the WNMA’s enabling legislation, was supposed to guarantee the accuracy of the WNMA’s construction plans.

As of 1926, Moore realized that "no picture of the house has come down to us, nor have excavations been made to locate it...there is reason to believe that the monument which ostensibly marks the site [is] built over the ruins of an outhouse, one chimney of which was standing within the memory of persons now living." Thus concerned, Moore sought archeological assistance. He unsuccessfully petitioned the Army Corps of Engineers for an excavation of the birth site, but had better luck with the United States Engineer's Office. Secretary of War Dwight Davis consented and put War Department Engineer J. Arthur Hook to the job. Hook arrived at Wakefield on April 9, 1926 and, after only cursory investigations with a probing stick, discovered discrepancies between his findings and local memory. He returned on May 10 and, with Josephine Rust watching close by, excavated around the iron fence surrounding the granite obelisk (figure 13). In short order, Hook turned out pottery shards, assorted buckles, a clay pipe, and scattered pieces of broken china and glass. Oyster shell deposits, pine bark, crushed stone, and the imprint left behind by a long-rotted wood post appeared just beyond the memorial.

Rust was elated. Not only did she find Hook "painstaking, interested and efficient," but his discoveries spelled big profits for the WNMA. Hook sent shards of recovered salt-glaze ware to Smithsonian Institution archeologist Walter Hough who had made a name for himself excavating in the southwestern National Parks beginning in the

---

24 Cited in Hatch, Popes Creek Plantation, 84.
25 The Army Corps of Engineers under Major James O'Connor had been put in charge of constructing an approach road to the monument. Moore requested that the Corps perform excavations at the birth site, but O'Connor responded that their funding extended only to construction of the approach road. Moore to O'Connor, 25 April 1925, and O'Connor to Moore, 15 June 1925, Wakefield Association files, FAC Records, RG 66, NAB.
26 Beasley, "The Birthplace of a Chief," 205; and Hatch, Popes Creek Plantation, 84. Hook described his first day of work in Hook to War Department, 9 April 1926, Wakefield Files, FAC, RG 66, NAB.
27 NPS Records 14/25, GEWA contains an 8 ½” x 11” drawing of Hook's 1926 excavations.
28 Rust, "Wakefield National Memorial Association, Report of the President."
1880s. Hough in turn pieced the sherds together to create a template from which the Lenox Company fashioned a line of dishware featuring "the famous Boar’s Head platter and other pieces" (figure 14). Lenox paid the WNMA a five percent return on their profits from sales of the reproduction dishware. In this roundabout way, Hook’s work netted Rust over $5,000 by the end of April 1928—not bad for an organization desperately trying to match Rockefeller’s contribution.

Moore did not share Rust’s excitement. In a letter written to historian Lyon G. Tyler toward the end of 1926, Moore expressed a startlingly different idea about the goals of the Wakefield restoration:

It is proposed by the Wakefield National Memorial Association to maintain the outlines at least of these foundations. The rest house and museum which the Association expects to build will be erected on a convenient site, but not on the birthplace site, which will show the outlines of the house. The new structure will show a house of the period, but of course, will not attempt to reproduce the Washington house.

Moore’s sudden turnaround surely stemmed from what Hook’s work revealed about the rift between archeological actuality and local lore. We can be certain, however, that Moore did not speak for the entire WNMA when he described “a house of the period...[that] will not attempt to reproduce” Washington’s birth house. Rust would have been outraged had she known that Moore entertained an alternative plan. Moore’s letter

29 Rothman, America’s National Monuments, 15, 79.
31 Ibid.
32 Moore to Tyler, 10 November 1926, Wakefield Association files, FAC Records, RG 66, NAB.
33 It is worth noting, however, that the NPS pursued a very similar plan forty years later. The Park’s 1971 Development Concept plan proposed the following:

The foundations which have been called “building X” shall be identified as those of the birthplace house, and they will be outlined in a suitable fashion to show their exact location and dimensions...It [a sign or wayside marker] would then direct the visitor to the Memorial house, describing it as a facsimile of a typical home of the period, and as a place where the visitor can learn something of the life that George’s parents might have led...The Memorial house shall be described as a facsimile of a typical, or representative home of the period, that might have been built by a moderately wealthy person, in the tidewater area of Virginia. There shall be no
does indicate, however, that important individuals party to the Wakefield project harbored grave doubts about its wisdom as early as 1926.

Undeterred, the WNMA hired Washington, D.C. architect Edward Donn, Jr. to weave together its various fragments of historical hearsay into plans for what was supposed to be a replica of the actual birth house. Donn’s first attempt, a proposed twenty-by-forty-foot building oriented along an east-west running centerline, simply would not fit the footprint created by the foundations excavated at the government monument. Donn returned to the drawing board, and, by October 1927, won WNMA approval for a much larger design. This new “replica” measured fifty-by-thirty-eight feet along a north-south axis. It dwarfed the foundations excavated in 1896, but oriented as it was, enveloped them as if they constituted just a portion of the original. In a curious twist, the Washington family suddenly recalled that this was, in fact, exactly how the house must have looked. Mrs. John B. (Mary Minor) Lightfoot—a niece of George Washington Ball—remembered a painting of the original house that hung in her uncle’s home during her childhood. As she recalled it, the painting depicted a house with ten dormers, four chimneys, and brick walls—just like Donn’s design. Charles Hoppin considered Lightfoot’s memory the ultimate stamp of authenticity and threw the full force of his support behind Donn’s design.

All the while, Hook compiled his report for the War Department. Because he had not uncovered any foundations beyond those excavated in 1896, he could not comment

---

inference made that it is a copy or reconstruction of the original house, but neither shall there be a direct statement made that it is not a copy of that home.

See Development Concept (draft), 1970, George Washington Birthplace National Monument, NPS Files 19/25, GEWA.

34 NPS Records 14/25, GEWA contains a large format copy of Donn’s 20 October 1930 plans for the reconstructed Memorial House.

one way or the other on the possibility of an alternative house location or design. He did, however, raise the issue in his final report. The War Department took the opportunity created by Hook’s report to launch an investigation of its own. In 1927, it sent a party of experts—including Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.—to assess the viability of the WNMA’s plan. Olmsted’s involvement reveals the severity of the War Department’s concern. As inheritor of his father’s landscape design legacy (Olmsted, Sr. is famous for designs including New York’s Central Park and Chicago’s 1893 Colombian Exhibition), Olmsted, Jr. championed scenic preservation during the early twentieth century and even drafted portions of the 1916 Act of Congress that authorized creation of the NPS. Not surprisingly, Olmsted and his companions harbored deep concerns about the wisdom of calling the proposed Memorial House a “replica.” Olmsted himself warned that doing so would guarantee that, despite any interpretive cautions, visitors would assume the house to be George Washington’s actual birth home. Undeterred, the WNMA continued its push and when Congress transferred the federal holdings at Wakefield from the War Department to the Department of the Interior on January 23, 1930, Rust and the WNMA no longer needed permission from the War Department.

Without delay the Association unleashed its reconstructive ethos upon the landscape along Popes Creek. Engineer O.G. Taylor—whose services Horace Albright made available to the Association following property transfer—performed one last excavation at the site during September 1930, only to confirm the findings documented in

38 Olmstead communicated these concerns directly to Charles Moore in a March 18, 1929 letter. Beasley, “The Birthplace of a Chief,” 205.
1881-82, 1896, and 1926. Because FAC approval of the WNMA’s building plans approved destruction of the old foundations to make way for construction of the Memorial House, Taylor’s 1930 dig revealed the foundations for the last time. NPS landscape architect Charles Peterson railed against the destruction. He described the operation as,

One of the most culpably destructive operations of which I have ever heard. To tear out the last remaining evidence of a structure of such important historical associations as these without first having made an accurate record of the findings is an inexcusable act of presumption by the architect...a great archeological crime has been perpetrated.39

NPS assistant director Arno Cammerer wrote to Albright that, “Peterson has a reaction similar to some others, who however have subordinated their opinions in the long run to the majority. I hope that Peterson will consider his opinions privately and not give voice to them publicly to our and his embarrassment.”40 Albright—himself wary of embarrassment—did not intervene and, with government support, the WNMA proceeded to initiate what would become an immensely challenging interpretive conundrum for decades to come. As we will see, however, the Association’s own stubborn adherence to the Custis stone legacy ultimately preserved the very foundations it thought would be sealed forever beneath the “replica” Memorial House.

Building X Uncovered

Just as the WNMA secured what seemed like a massive victory, but before it could begin work on the Memorial House, Donn noticed a curious mound in the earth some fifty feet south of the building site. He asked Taylor to dig an exploratory trench through the mound. To their surprise, Taylor discovered the remains of yet another

39 Ibid., 209.
40 Ibid.
building—these much larger than the supposed birth home foundations. He called the discovery “Building X” and described it in a September 30, 1930 report to the FAC:

Only one foot under the surface a chimney foundation was discovered. Excavating was continued so far as we had any lead until we had uncovered a ‘U’ shaped building of considerable size. The long side is the bottom of the ‘U’, and it is 58 feet long and 19 feet wide. The foundations are 18 inches thick and a cross wall, without any opening, divides the cellar unto two rooms. The bottom of the cellar walls are from 5 to 7 feet below the surface, and there is a cellar fireplace in the extreme ends of each room.41

Startled, Donn drafted a hasty conceptual drawing of a building that could have stood on the new foundations and sent it to Charles Hoppin. Hoppin brushed aside the obvious significance of Building X and replied on October 24, 1930:

And so it is, that it has never been possible for me to entertain a notion of any other site or house on any other part of the Wakefield estate, as the birthplace site and house, than the one where the monument was placed. I do not believe that there is anything whatever, or ever was anything, that can or ever could alter the site of the birth house; and so I have no particular interest in the other buildings located elsewhere other than that their existence at one time or another proves that the birth house was solely used as a residence for the members of the Washington family.42

Hoppin’s flip response did not allay Donn’s concerns. The Memorial House building contractor, Edwin Conquest, shortly thereafter remarked to a WNMA member that “Mr. Donn states that it is not his idea that the present building is to represent an exact reproduction of Washington’s birthplace.” Moreover, Donn expressed his desire to Albright that visitors might “stop using the word replica to describe the building he had designed as typical of the period.”43 Like Moore before him, Donn evidently sought to reconceptualize the project lest he and others involved become embroiled in what no doubt looked like an impending scandal.

41 Cited in Hatch, Popes Creek Plantation, 88.
42 Hoppin Cited in Hatch, Popes Creek Plantation, 88. Hoppin implies here that Building X must have been a storage facility of some sort.
43 Hosmer, Preservation Comes of Age, 490.
Hoppin, however, stayed the course. He argued that Building X was likely one of several outbuildings the Washingtons used to store a variety of possessions listed in a 1762 inventory that—according to Hoppin—could not have all fit inside the house. Moreover, as the argument went, the Washingtons certainly needed outbuildings to house their slaves and servants.44 Incredibly, Donn—supposedly an authority on colonial Virginia architecture—came to accept Hoppin’s argument over time. He even elaborated on it, adding that Building X began as a single-room structure and, as such, did not reflect the wealth nor stature of the Washington family. Nor could he accept that the structure’s fireplaces were substantial enough to indicate domestic use.45 Curiously, though, Donn did not express his acceptance of Hoppin’s position until after the Memorial House was complete. Taylor had uncovered Building X two months prior to the beginning of construction. Donn waited until December 1932, however, to assert his belief that his own design was in fact sound and it was not until then that serious public concern surfaced with regard to the authenticity of the reconstruction.46

In the meantime, as work began on the Memorial House, Taylor backfilled the Building X site thereby removing it from the public eye. And at the Monument’s formal dedication ceremony on May 14, 1932, speeches by Secretary of the Interior Ickes and WNMA Vice President Mrs. Anthony Wayne Cook lauded the fruits of their cooperative effort without raising the specter of archeological controversy.47 Still, rumors concerning

44 Hatch, *Popes Creek Plantation*, 88.
45 Ibid., 89.
47 See copy of address by Mrs. Anthony Wayne Cook at the 14 May 1932 transfer ceremony in NPS Records 6/26, GEWA. This file also contains a variety of periodical coverage of the opening ceremonies.
the building's authenticity had already come to the surface. NPS Chief Historian Verne Chatelain remarked during the spring of 1932:

> It seems that there is real doubt [expressed in the newspapers] that the birth site itself is correctly located, not to mention the house... I see very considerable danger if this feeling of doubt should get widespread, and it might very easily. I don't know just what we ought to do to combat it, but I think that the quarters from which it comes are entirely too "respectable" to ignore.48

If Albright and the NPS had in fact looked the other way for the sake of expediency, Chatelain demonstrated that their decision to do so had already begun to reap repercussions.

"Conclusion: the design at Wakefield is not authentic"

Backfilling Building X seemed for a time to keep controversy at bay. And other archeological discoveries briefly obscured the problem. During the Association's 1930-32 memorialization campaign, for example, Taylor uncovered another hitherto unknown foundation about two hundred feet southeast of the Washington family burial ground. He and the Association presumed the fourteen-by-twenty-foot brick foundation to be the remains of Colonel John Washington's (George's great grandfather) homestead. An old casement window uncovered nearby hinted at an even larger structure in the area.49 The WNMA continued to fund periodic digs even after the NPS received ownership of the Monument. A 1934 reinvestigation of the burial ground site, for instance, turned up a 1679 coin and Washington family bottle seals.50 Another dig closer to the Potomac River revealed yet another brick foundation, this one thought to be part of Henry Brooks' original homestead.

---

48 Chatelain to Bryant and Demaray, 5 March 1932, NPS Records 17/25, GEWA.
49 Hatch, *Popes Creek Plantation*, 89.
50 Ibid.
For a time, these discoveries turned attention away from the Building X episode, but an accidental discovery on March 30, 1935 brought renewed immediacy to an old problem. Superintendent Hough and his staff stumbled upon a fourteen-foot square brick floor buried just west of the Memorial House, next to the WNMA’s reconstructed Ancient Kitchen. Where Taylor and others had been reticent to call the comparatively enormous foundations discovered in 1930 anything less speculative than Building X, Hough and his crew immediately assumed this discovery to be the remains of a smokehouse. The smokehouse find delighted Hough, who reveled in the subterranean possibilities of his Monument, but it reminded him of the lingering uncertainty surrounding Building X. Desperate to put that uncertainty to rest, Hough aggressively sought to undertake a park-wide archeological survey.

As it happened, labor for just this kind of work was plentiful during the mid-1930s as state and Federal governments responded to the Great Depression by creating public works projects. Hough tapped into a Virginia Economic Relief Act (VERA) program in the fall of 1934 and found there the labor he needed to undertake the survey. But VERA could only provide $42 per month for a supervisor, not nearly enough to employ a qualified archeologist. As luck would have it, President Roosevelt’s New Deal had brought a Civilian Conservation Core (CCC) camp—camp SP-19—to the Northern Neck of Virginia in 1933. Although engaged in the construction of

---

51 It may also be of consequence that Charles O. Paullin, of the Division of Historical Research of Carnegie Institution of Washington, put forth his own assessment of the archeological controversy in early 1934 and concluded, unsurprisingly, that though there was no concrete evidence to support the Memorial House’s claims of authenticity, it seemed to be in roughly the right spot. Paullin’s argument may have given Hough new confidence in his archeological endeavors. See Charles O. Paullin, “The Birthplace of George Washington,” *William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine*, second series 14:1 (January 1934).
52 Hatch, *Popes Creek Plantation*, 89.
53 SMR, July 1935, NPS Records, GEWA. Hough provides further details concerning this situation in SMR, December 1934; and SAR, 1935.
Westmoreland State Park, CCC enrollees frequently visited the Monument for rest and relaxation. With this in mind, Hough drafted a full-fledged archeological program in March 1936 with an eye toward using the CCC’s trained staff. He proposed to investigate seven sites and to launch an “exploratory survey near the mansion house” with labor provided by CCC camp SP-19 and supervised jointly by historian Oscar F. Northington, Jr. and assistant architects Stuart Barnette and P. Day. NPS director Arno Cammerer approved the plan on March 25, 1936 and work began almost immediately.

CCC laborers once again uncovered the foundations that Taylor had backfilled four years prior. It was a difficult project plagued by logistical complications. Frustrated by slow progress, Hough remarked that “the CCC boys haven’t much instinct to punish themselves.” Problems with supervision also raised Hough’s ire. Day apparently vanished from the scene half-way through the project and Northington and Barnette spent alternating weeks at Wakefield attending to other NPS concerns forty miles away in Fredericksburg. Still, Hough clung tenaciously to the hope that the excavations would settle once and for all that Building X was not the actual site of Washington’s birth. But, much to his dismay, its foundations seemed to support just that conclusion. The dig revealed “a substantial multi-cellared brick foundation enclosing an ash and burned rubble layer...strongly suggest[ing] that Building X, rather than the foundation sealed beneath the Memorial House, was the true Wakefield. An additional 14,000 artifacts

54 For Hough’s notes regarding various archeological finds prompting his proposal and comments concerning the necessity of additional archeological work for drafting a master plan, see SMR, March 1935 & May 1935, and SAR, 1935, NPS Records, GEWA.
55 See Rodnick, 69 for a thorough discussion of work performed under Hough’s plan. Additional details are contained in SAR, 1936, NPS Records, GEWA. Rodnick refers to Day both as “P. Day” and as “H. Summerfield Day.” It is unclear which is correct.
56 SMR, April 1936 and December 1936, NPS Records, GEWA.
unearthed at the site further supported this conclusion.\textsuperscript{57} In all respects, Building X fit the mold: a substantial house, full of domestic items, burnt to the ground some two centuries prior (figure 15).

Hough's investigative excitement turned to cautious denial by the fall of 1936. A letter written by NPS acting Chief of Research A.P. Stauffer that fall suggests that Hough may very well have undertaken to cover up the evidence just as it had been in 1932:

Supt. Hough of the George Washington Birthplace National Monument was in Washington and discussed with me the desirability of immediately filling in the foundations uncovered at Wakefield during the course of the archeological work done there this summer. He felt that the rapid approach of freezing weather, with it a possibility of damage to the foundations as a result of crumbling, make it advisable to fill in the excavation immediately. As chairman of the committee appointed to inspect the foundations, I communicated with Regional Historian Appleman, a member of the committee. I found that he had consulted the other members, Messrs. Day, Parris and Porter, and also with Messrs. Barnette and Northington and found that they were strongly of the opinion that the foundations should be left uncovered until the committee has an opportunity to examine them again...The members of the committee felt that little or no damage to the foundations was probable within the next few weeks.\textsuperscript{58}

Although it is not possible to know one way or the other what Hough had in mind, it is likely that the superintendent was acting out of sheer frustration. Beyond basic logistical difficulties, budget cutbacks continually threatened Hough's plans and by the end of 1936 had finally put them to an end.\textsuperscript{59} Hough attempted to revive the program but admitted in April 1937 that "much to our regret it appears as though our archeological program has completely collapsed by failure to secure a supervisor. It does seem a shame that since

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{57} Beasley, "The Birthplace of a Chief," 212.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Stauffer to Branch Spalding (unidentified NPS official), 19 October 1936, NPS Records 19/25, GEWA.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Beasley, "The Birthplace of a Chief," 213.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
we can get free labor from a CCC camp that for lack of a supervisor the entire opportunity is lost."  

Although skepticism concerning the Wakefield restoration had always existed at various levels throughout the NPS, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes himself found the results of Hough's 1936 archeological program too provocative to ignore. Ickes resolved to settle the Memorial House's status—was it a memorial or was it a replica? He asked Stauffer to look into the decision-making processes leading to approval and construction of the Memorial House. He also had Stuart Barnette assess the authenticity of the building. Both men completed their reports, but the whereabouts of those reports are unknown. In fact, correspondence reveals that both reports went missing soon after being submitted. Fortunately for us, Ickes' administrative assistant Leona Graham summarized portions of both reports for Assistant Secretary Burlew on July 9, 1937. Although not complete, Graham's memo—which begins, "Conclusion: that the design at Wakefield is not authentic"—indicates that backfilling was not enough to keep Building X long out of view.

Graham's memo shows us that Stauffer criticized the WNMA for proceeding with its work without any documentation of the original house. He pointed out that the Association only attempted a replica "as nearly as may be practicable." Moreover,

---

60 SMR, April 1937, NPS Records, GEWA. Hough further described the situation: "Here we are frankly disappointed since with free labor available we are obliged to do nothing because no supervisor can be supplied. The monument is about to receive delivery of a special track and spend over $600 of our funds for this work, yet it seems now there won't be any work to do. Attempts are being made to interest the Association in obtaining the cooperation of the Carnegie Institution, who might supply the supervision, since the park service cannot furnish such a man. Archeology is felt to be our basic opportunity for research, since all the records so far studied have produced so little information. Here in the ground some day will be found most of the information to be had about this place." SMR, May 1937, NPS Records, GEWA.

61 NPS Records 16/25, GEWA contains testimonials by local residents regarding the location of the original house. This file also contains the 9 July 1937 Graham memorandum. Graham indicates that Barnette submitted his report on May 10, 1937.
Barnette’s report—according to Stauffer—“raises serious question as to whether the restoration is even typical of Colonial Virginia dwellings.” Stauffer argued that although the WNMA’s granting legislation specifically called for the erection of a replica, both the FAC and the NPS had been complicit in allowing “deviation from the statutory requirements respecting authenticity of design.” The NPS’s defense against Stauffer’s accusations of complicity is also summarized in Graham’s memo. It was the WNMA’s responsibility, after all, to observe its own congressional mandate. And had not the FAC been named by Congress to approve all construction plans? Finally, “there was...lacking the professional historical approach [then] that appears to prevail in the Service today.” Indeed, the NPS Branch of Historic Sites and Buildings had not even come into being as of 1931. And, most importantly, the WNMA’s granting legislation did not even require the NPS to become involved in the project until after the Association had completed construction of its replica building.

Finally, Stauffer criticized the WNMA for not paying due attention to the archeological work undertaken by Hook and Taylor. Why did the WNMA—including Donn—ignore archeological evidence that clearly revealed the Memorial House plans to be inaccurate? Graham’s memo suggests that the Association’s determination to complete the Memorial House in time for Washington’s 200th birthday “would preclude careful historic research or consideration of archeological findings.” But the memo puts forth an even more provocative explanation that, if true, sets us on a return path to our earlier discussion of objects and memory:

There has been some speculation about the apparent indifference of the WNMA to the destruction of irreplaceable historic evidence. Current gossip advances the explanation that Mrs. Rust, believing so strongly that her own childhood home (Twiford) had been designed after the original George Washington birth house,
prevailed upon the architect to pattern the restoration along the lines of Twiford, other data notwithstanding.

It thus appears likely that, after all the wrangling over designs and various claims to historical and architectural authority, the WNMA’s plans for its “replica” Memorial House were drawn to specifications put forth by Josephine Rust’s longing for her own lost youth.

As damning as Graham’s memo is, there is surprisingly little correspondence available from which to gauge the tone of response. If nothing else, the reports convinced Ickes that the NPS could no longer claim the Memorial House to be a replica. So began protracted debate between the WNMA and the NPS concerning the proper interpretation of the Memorial House.62 In a last-ditch effort to protect the Memorial House’s reputation, Charles Moore requested an opinion from Fiske Kimball—whom Moore considered “the best authority on Colonial architecture”—on the Building X question.63 Kimball considered the evidence and responded in September 1937 that the foundations beneath the Memorial house were “inadequate for those of Washington’s birthplace” and that there was “no escape from the belief that [the Building X remains] were the foundations of the mansion house.”64

Although the NPS and the WNMA had butted heads before, it was this episode in Monument history that polarized relations between Hough, the WNMA, and NPS regional staff. Hough and the WNMA stood fast by their assertion that the Memorial

63 Ibid., 89.
64 Kimball cited in Hatch, Popes Creek Plantation, 213. Kimball’s response must have shocked Moore since, almost a decade prior, he gave his blessing to the project. In 1928, Kimball wrote to Moore that “It seems to me as if the matter [of the Memorial House’s design] had been considered very carefully. The type of house shown is of course highly typical of that period in Virginia...I presume that the superstructure of the house was more probably of wood, but it seems to me the substitution of brick is well justified where they desire to give it a permanent memorial character. All power to you!” Fiske Kimball to Charles Moore, 23 February 1928, Commission of Fine Arts, Project files, 1910-1952, RG 66, NAB.
House was in fact a replica of Washington's birth house. The disappearance of key documents suggesting otherwise left their position relatively unassailable. Graham's partial memo is all that is left of Stauffer and Barnette's reports. And project reports expected from the 1936 archeological survey never reached NPS files. Barnette—who had become primarily responsible for the project—never submitted a final report. During the spring of 1939, Acting Supervisor of Historic Sites Francis Ronalds confronted Chief of the Branch of Plans and Design Thomas Vint about the situation:

During the summer of 1936 and in the early part of 1937, archeological excavations were carried on at Washington's birthplace with a view to uncovering and studying the foundations known as Building X. Although for a time Mr. Northington and junior archeologist H.S. [sic] Day were identified with this project, the major part of the work was under the direction of assistant architect Stuart Barnette. A memo in our files indicates that on April 13, 1937 the excavations had been completed and the foundations backfilled to protect them from the elements. At that time, Mr. Barnette was working on measured drawings and the report summarizing the results of the archeological project. As far as we can determine, this report has never been completed and no finished drawings of the foundation have been received. In view of the primary importance of Washington's birthplace and the many problems presented by the existence of such large and pretentious foundations as those of Building X, it is suggested that Mr. Barnette be asked to complete his report and measured drawings at an early date.\(^6^5\)

Within a week, Vint sent a memo of his own in an attempt to place pressure on Acting Regional Director Herbert Evison to account for the oversight: "it seems to me vitally important that a full and complete record of this archeological work be placed in the records in order that no criticism of this service's responsibilities in this regard can be

\(^{65}\) Ronalds to Vint, 11 May 1939, Records of the National Park Service NE Region, 1936-1952, RG 79, NAMAR.
offered. Evison responded bluntly that Barnette had been relocated to Salem, Massachusetts and would not be able to recommence work on the report for some time.

The Rodnick Report

It is not my intent here to uncover a scandal although, by all accounts, it certainly does appear that the mishandling of official materials concerning Building X may have been more than coincidental. And, no matter what side of the issue they fell on, all parties privy to the Building X debate stood to benefit from a quick resolution. Hough and the WNMA believed that the Memorial House was authentic and properly placed. Both would have accepted a relaxation of Agency concern as a sign of official acquiescence. And the NPS, despite its concern for reputation, certainly stood to suffer from ongoing bad publicity. So, in hindsight, it is likely that the Building X question may very well have faded into the recesses of local memory following the bureaucratic demise of Ickes’ investigation. Ironically, Hough’s own troubled conscience was ultimately responsible for reviving the very question that anguished him so.

In early 1939, Hough explained his lingering concern in a letter to Josephine Rust’s widower, Harry Lee Rust. Despite doubts harbored by NPS historians, Hough wrote, “there are many I am sure, including ourselves, who believe that Mr. Custis must have been correct in 1815 when he placed the first stone marker at ‘Wakefield’ and identified the cellar hole now covered by the Memorial Mansion as the birthplace of our national hero.” The superintendent announced his intent to “fight him [the park’s research historian] on this matter”; he planned to strike the first blow at a January 26

---

66 Vint to Evison, 20 May 1939, includes attached copy of a memo dated 11 May 1939 from Ronalds, Records of the National Park Service NE Region, 1936-1952, RG 79, NAMAR.
67 Evison to Director Cammerer, 26 May 1939, Records of the National Park Service NE Region, 1936-1952, RG 79, NAMAR.
conference where “this all-important matter will come up.” What Hough had in mind was yet another large-scale archeological investigation. The NPS granted Hough permission to pursue his project and, in September 1941, a new program began “anticipated [to] extend through several years and ... to temporarily destroy the beauty of our grounds while trenching work proceeds.” Hough secured the services of CCC camp SP-19 senior foreman and historian, David Rodnick who reported for duty on August 28. Hough greeted Rodnick with open arms hoping that “this long needed work ... will greatly improve our knowledge of the area.”

Rodnick’s work certainly did “greatly improve” knowledge of the area, but not at all in the way Hough had hoped or imagined. Unlike previous digs, Rodnick’s project generated considerable local interest from the outset. The Fredericksburg Free-Lance Star announced “Excavations Planned to Find Exact Site of Washington Home.” Hough chaffed at that particular headline, throwing doubt as it did on his firm belief that the Memorial House already did mark the exact site of Washington’s birth home. But for Hough, the worst had yet to come. The country’s official entry into World War II put an end to Federal public works programming and, without the CCC, Hough’s archeological program floundered by late 1941. Faced with this change of circumstances, Rodnick retooled and rather than re-excavate the Building X foundations, devoted his four months

---

68 Hough to Rust, 14 January 1939, NPS Records 19/25, GEWA.
69 Hough declared in his 1940 Annual Report that the “Monument needs a complete archeological research program, followed by the reconditioning of the several outbuildings in order to present a more authentic picture of the colonial home place.”
70 SMR, September 1941.
71 SMR, August 1941.
72 “Excavations Planned to Find Exact Site of Washington Home” in Free-Lance Star (October 27, 1941).
73 Specifically on December 5 when it was announced that Camp SP-19 was scheduled for transfer to defense work near Quantico, Virginia. See SMR, December 1941.
to a thorough review of all documents and records relating to previous excavations and ensuing debates.

The result, "Orientation Report on the George Washington Birthplace National Monument," released in October 1941, instantly revived the Building X controversy. Rodnick concluded that not only did Building X mark the true site of Washington's birth, but that the decision-making processes leading to the design of the Memorial House lacked scholarly, professional, and historical integrity. Rodnick systematically discredited the WNMA's arguments in support of the Memorial House's authenticity by bringing to bear careful historical and archeological analysis indicative of an increasingly professionalized NPS. Hough bellowed with dismay. An article on the front page of the *Washington Post* asked, "was a mistake made 10 years ago in erecting the memorial mansion at Wakefield, Va., birthplace of George Washington?" A befuddled though defensive Hough responded, "while the bulk of the article was favorable to the monument, its headline and introduction cast doubt on the location of the memorial mansion, and it has hurt the place."

Although Rodnick did not add any new data into the discussions surrounding Building X, his report did for the first time condense all existing data into one frank and often condemnatory evaluation of the commemorative process at Popes Creek. No one had, until this point, publicly held the WNMA accountable for its work at Wakefield. Moreover, no one prior to Rodnick—save A.P. Stauffer whose report had mysteriously

---

74 Copies of Rodnick's report are available in several locations including the GEWA library, the NACP, and at HFC. The HFC possesses the most complete Rodnick materials including drafts of the report, addenda, and Rodnick's own hand-written research notes.


76 SMR, October 1941.
vanished—had so blatantly challenged Hoppin’s authority in the matter. Rodnick
devoted several pages to dispelling Hoppin’s argument that Building X could not be the
original site due to its structural accumulation over time, its orientation overlooking
Popes Creek, an absence of period building hardware at the site, and the presence there of
nineteenth-century artifacts. Rodnick made specific mention of the lost Stauffer-Barnette reports and Hoppin’s questionable role in the context of the original house and shed serious doubt on the
credibility of the NPS’s own handling of relevant research materials. Quite bluntly,
Rodnick concluded that “the present Memorial mansion is neither a replica nor a
reproduction of the original Washington mansion. Nor is there any evidence to show that
it was built on the birth site of George Washington. In fact, it appears that the present
memorial mansion was built on the site of an outbuilding.” As for Custis, Rodnick
surmised that Washington’s eccentric heir simply missed his mark and that posterity
followed suit.

Rodnick’s report set off a firestorm. NPS director Newton B. Drury wrote
directly to the WNMA. He suggested that Rodnick’s work mandated “the formulation of
a plan for exhibition of those foundations” and that the Memorial House would
eventually “house and display the many pieces of Washingtonia” found and donated by
the WNMA. Fiske Kimball reiterated his belief that Building X was the original house
and suggested to Supervisor of Historic Sites Ronald Lee that once Moore and Hoppin
“have passed from the scene, it might be good to pull down the memorial mansion.”

---

78 Rodnick makes specific mention of the lost Stauffer-Barnette reports and Hoppin’s questionable role in the “Orientation Report,” 80, 86-88.
79 Drury to Crowninshield, 21 November 1941, NPS Records 19/25, GEWA.
80 Kimball also suggested creating a model of the “whole group, which could be exhibited and serve as a corrective of any misconceptions.” Kimball to Lee, 18 December 1941, National Park Service Records, RG 79, NAB.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Regional Supervisor of Historic Sites Roy Appleman lavished the report with praise. He commended its “high degree of objectivity [and] careful scientific analysis of the available facts.” Rodnick’s report, according to Appleman, was “the best of its kind that [he’d] seen prepared by Park Service personnel.” Lee forwarded Appleman’s comments to Drury asking that if “Mr. Albright’s article can be located…we should begin prep. [sic] of memo to secty. [sic].” Lee was referring to Albright’s 1931 New York Times piece lauding the authenticity of the reconstruction at Wakefield. Much had changed in ten years and Rodnick’s report turned the thoughts of those in the Washington office to damage control and reputation maintenance.

Among all the responses to Rodnick’s report, however, none was more tortured nor more telling than Superintendent Hough’s. Hough labored long and hard over the content and tone of his response. After all, the report that had earned such high praise from NPS higher ups did so by discrediting exactly those arguments Hough put forward for nearly ten years in support of the Memorial House’s claims to authenticity. Hough could not relinquish his position without some difficulty and he explained as much in his official 1942 response: “what comments to make on this report is a matter over which I have thought a great deal. I have written at least six memoranda, only to believe that none were adequate.” Hough’s earliest drafts were as improper as they were inadequate. In one, Hough accused Rodnick of “acting on the preconceived conclusion that the present Memorial mansion had been built on the wrong site.” Another attempt speaks to what must have been a tense relationship between researcher and superintendent,

81 Roy Appleman official comments, 5 January 1942, National Park Service Records, RG 79, NAB.
declaring “I have done my best to play ball with Dr. Rodnick.” An especially bitter draft implied that Rodnick was simply inept: “Apparently the present program is dedicated to disprove Washington’s birthplace without evidence—only on conclusions of inexperienced men or men of limited research, timid men who may be scholarly but are of limited vision and appreciation.”

Hough eventually gathered himself and concluded that “it should be determined for once and for all whether the place is a Memorial – or a Restoration.” As Hough understood the situation, the Monument had always presented itself to the public as a memorial and that claiming the Memorial House to be an authentic restoration would be “unwarranted, ill timed and unfortunate.” He agreed that if future research allowed for construction of an accurate replica that the Memorial House should be “gracefully remove[d]” and replaced. The problem at Wakefield, in Hough’s opinion, was not how to interpret the Memorial House, but rather how to interpret the landscape so widely and readily associated with Washington’s birth:

After all, we have custody of Washington’s birthplace – and it is our duty to protect and administer it for the benefit and enjoyment of the people. Our greatest value is the inherent quality of the place. It has fine esthetic and sentimental value as well as historic association. We do have certain positive values which cannot be denied, and they should be protected…that their [the WNMA] efforts have been successful seems amply vouched for by the thousands upon thousands of expressions of appreciation received from the public. The public, as I view it, is the jury which will say finally what is right and what is wrong, and after all it is the public whom we are employed to serve.83

Hough’s letter reveals him attempting to distance himself from the Building X problem by shifting the site’s loci sanctorum from the building to the landscape—a strategy that persists at Washington’s birthplace today. Even so, Hough could not let go of the building in which he and an entire community had invested so much. Clipped to Hough’s

83 Hough to Director Drury, 7 January 1942, National Park Service Records, RG 79, NAB.
final response is a scrap of paper on which the harried superintendent scrawled a few final thoughts: “suggest the mansion be not taken down, at least not in the immediate future;” “that the mansion be considered a museum housing period furniture;” and “that attention be focused on building X as the birthplace.”

Were it not for the onset of American involvement in World War II, the Building X fiasco may very well have overcome Hough’s ability to contain it. The bureaucratic and financial rigors of mobilization, however, significantly curtailed the NPS’s ability to maintain its burgeoning park system let alone worry about the historical credibility of a single building in one small park. It was at this time for example that NPS headquarters had to relocate briefly to a warehouse in Chicago to make room for military preparations in D.C. And no one in the park system could have anticipated in 1941 how devastating the combined effect of budget cuts and visitation increases would be by the war’s end in 1945. It is therefore not surprising that, after the war, Rodnick’s report lacked immediacy. In fact, it is as if planners had almost entirely forgotten about his work. In 1947, for example, regional archeologist J.C. Harrington cautioned the regional director against making any final conclusions about the archeological record at Wakefield “until full and complete information on the site is secured.”

Even so, it appears that even Hough had come to doubt his own position on Building X by the late 1940s. In a letter to a fellow superintendent, Hough outlined his argument and wondered if its premises were legitimate:

If you have been good enough to follow me thus far, may I ask you as a friend, this question. You majored in History, and I want to ask you as an Historian, do you consider this case a good case? I had good training in science and I’ll admit that it isn’t scientifically sound. But I can’t help but feel that the case is true none the less. Have I got a point worth taking up with my historical superiors to see if

---

84 Harrington to Regional Director, 27 August 1947, NPS Records 9/25, GEWA.
we may say on the sign that the memorial house marks the site of the original house?85

Still, to whatever extent Hough may have questioned his own rationale, he never abandoned his original position. A visitor handbook penned by Hough in 1951 makes no mention of Building X as a possible site of the birth house and somewhat elliptically remarks “there are various possible solutions, but none are conclusive.”86 Even so, the NPS remained, on paper at least, ambivalent about the Building X controversy. But in December 1953, soon after Hough’s death, an anonymous letter to park ranger and historian Carl Flemer revealed that “as it stands we are almost positive that the site of the birth home is...where building ‘x’ is located” and that “one of the first things the new superintendent will have to do will be to revise all signs which are not correct.”87

Signs and Meaning at Washington’s Birthplace

This concern with signs—note Hough’s reference to “what we may say on the sign” above—provides us with one last example of how and where the contestation of historical meaning took place at Washington’s birthplace. It also requires that we return once again to Dean MacCannell’s stages of site sacralization. I have already identified the Memorial House as an example of MacCannell’s fourth stage, mechanical reproduction. Just as Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. warned in 1927, the Memorial House—though not a “true” replica—did connote authenticity. Rust and the WNMA intended it to do just that and Superintendent Hough, who accepted the building’s location and design as gospel, spread the word to visitors. Building X, however, compromised the

---

85 The recipient is identified only as “Hummel.” This is most likely Edward A. Hummel who served as superintendent of Colonial National Historical Park from 1946 to 1952. Hough to Hummel, 25 February 1947, NPS Records 19/25, GEWA.
87 Anonymous to Carl Flemer, 16 February 1954, NPS Records 19/25, GEWA.
replica's authority. As MacCannell tells us, tourists in pursuit of the "true object" assume that "alongside of the copies of it, it has to be The Real Thing." This is exactly what happened at Wakefield. In a curious twist of signification, Building X derived authority as a true object through its close proximity to a replica that, as it turns, did not actually replicate Building X at all. So, although the WNMA was convinced that their Memorial House was the true object—or, at least, a kind of true object—visitors and, much to Hough’s chagrin, the local media inferred Building X’s authority through its juxtaposition with the supposed replica. Consequently, those convinced of the Memorial House’s authenticity undertook a remarkable effort to craft a narrative powerful enough to reassert the Memorial House’s authority over Building X.

In fact, the struggle to reinforce the Memorial House’s signifying power began even before Taylor uncovered Building X. In 1931, Moore asked Donn to erect a metal tablet in front of the Memorial House explaining to visitors the significance of Washington’s birthplace and the WNMA’s role there. Donn agreed and crafted a long, rambling narrative summarizing Washington’s years at Wakefield, previous commemorative efforts there, and the WNMA’s arrival. At the end, Donn added, “the house is not a copy of the original: it is typical of Virginia houses of the period.” The WNMA approved Moore’s inscription at its November 30, 1931 meeting and it appeared to satisfy everyone involved. Everyone, that is, except Charles Hoppin.

Moore’s choice of Donn to write the inscription would have been understood by everyone involved as a cautious effort to avoid involving the more obvious choice, historian Charles Hoppin. Despite their leadership roles within the WNMA, Hoppin and

---

88 MacCannell, The Tourist, 45.
89 Hosmer provides the best account of these events in Preservation Comes of Age, 490-91.

---

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Moore never cared much for one another. According to historian Charles Hosmer in *Preservation Comes of Age*, "Hoppin had never respected Moore’s sense of history."⁹¹ Hoppin’s frequent tirades in the press and in private correspondence suggest that he rarely respected anyone’s sense of history save his own. But Hoppin found Moore especially frustrating. As we have seen, Moore had always questioned the veracity of the Memorial House. That Moore exercised a veto on the WNMA by way of his affiliation with the FAC no doubt added to the threat perceived by Hoppin. Still, Hoppin could not contain his rage upon reading the last sentence of Donn’s inscription. Where Donn had done his best to succinctly explain a complicated design process, Hoppin perceived a direct and pointed refutation of his own research.

The WNMA mounted its bronze tablet with Donn’s inscription atop a stone pedestal in front of the Memorial House in 1931 (figure 16). Soon thereafter, Hoppin launched a campaign to have the placard removed and enlisted the assistance of W. Lanier Washington, a Washington descendent who maintained that the Birthplace had been deeded to the government by the Washington family, not by the Commonwealth of Virginia. Washington dashed off a letter of complaint to WNMA Vice President Mrs. Anthony Wayne Cook in 1932 explaining his own grievance and requesting that Hoppin be granted authority in the matter:

I presume you saw and examined the erroneous bronze tablet that was prepared by Charles Moore and erected on the Wakefield house. My first cousins and I signed a formal protest to it and sent it to the Secretary of the Interior, and had a reply from him to the effect that this tablet would be removed and a correct one, composed by Mr. Hoppin, put up in its place...I am informed that the first mentioned tablet has not been removed and we again have protested to Secretary Wilbur.⁹²

---

⁹¹ Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 492.
⁹² Washington to Cook, 19 September 1932, NPS Records 19/25, GEWA.

---

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Although Washington signed this letter, its scathing tone is suspiciously reminiscent of Hoppin's own style and it is possible that Hoppin penned the letter himself on behalf of Washington. Authorship notwithstanding, it is evident that Washington's concern regarding who should be recognized for deeding the property was a relatively minor concern. Rather, Hoppin probably intended the letter to instigate a larger battle over rights to craft the Memorial House inscription, if not as a pretense for allowing him to write his own.

The complaint achieved its desired effect and soon drew retired NPS Director Horace Albright into the fray. Ever one to avoid a controversy, Albright discussed the matter with Associate Director Demaray and, recognizing the lingering volatility of an angry Hoppin, agreed in early 1933 to have the placard removed going as far as to wipe the slate clear by having Hough's own correspondence on the sign crisis removed from NPS files.93 WNMA president Maude Worthington (Rust's interim replacement) asked that Hough take down the sign and place it in storage. Hough did so and additionally removed the stone pedestal and concrete base—which weighed over a ton—on January 30, 1933.94

In the wake of the 1931-33 sign crisis, the NPS tread lightly on matters of memorialization by means of placards and signs. In 1934, for example, the Daughters of the Cincinnati requested permission to plant a memorial tree at the Monument. Demaray explained to Hough that "there is no objection to the planting of a tree but we must avoid

93 See SMR, April 1932, GEWA; and Albright to Worthington, 7 January 1933, National Park Service Records, RG 79, NACP. Curiously, Hough thought the central issue in the sign crisis "hinges on the point as to who gave title to the federal government in 1882"—see SAR, January 1933, GEWA.
94 SMR, January 1933.
tablets and ceremonies which form the beginning of a long series." Caution alone, however, could not solve the problem of how to accurately and equitably explain the Memorial House to the public. In 1937, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes himself requested that Director Cammerer solve the problem. Cammerer wrote to Moore in August 1937 and suggested text for two signs—one at the park entrance that would caution visitors that what they were about to see was not in fact a replica and a second sign at the Memorial House reminding them of the same:

The original house, built and occupied by his father about 1726, was later destroyed by fire. It has not been copied and rebuilt. This Memorial Mansion marks the site of the original house. It is similar to Virginia plantation houses of the period, and was erected in 1930-31 by the Wakefield National Memorial Association under authority of Congress.

Cammerer added that “it is our purpose...to eliminate any ambiguity and to state clearly that the structure itself is not a replica or reconstruction.” He informed Moore that the NPS had received significant criticism from worthy sources concerning claims that the Memorial House was a typical Virginia plantation house.

Moore, however, was not willing to so easily fold the WNMA’s hand, even if he himself had concerns about the Memorial House’s veracity. He responded to Cammerer that the NPS’s suggested wording “gives away the essence of the restoration” and that “we ought not to do this.” Although a gap in correspondence prevents us from knowing what conversations followed Moore’s response, it seems that the WNMA and the NPS hammered out a compromise text within the year. On May 5, 1938, the park posted a new sign approved by Secretary Ickes:

---

95 Demaray to Hough, 9 March 1934, National Park Service Records, RG 79, NACP.
96 Cammerer to Moore, 13 August 1937, Commission of Fine Arts, Project Files, 1910-1952, RG 66, NAB.
97 Moore to Cammerer, 26 August 1937, Commission of Fine Arts, Project Files, 1910-1952, RG 66, NAB.
George Washington Birthplace National Monument established January 23, 1930. The memorial house was erected 1930-1931 by the Wakefield National Memorial Association under the authority of Congress. George Washington was born near this site on February 22, 1732. The original home built by his father Augustine, 1723-1726, was occupied by him until 1735. According to family tradition the house was burned during the Revolutionary War. This house is neither a reproduction nor a facsimile of the original. Its design follows a Virginia type plantation house of the eighteenth century.98

This version managed the Memorial House’s artifice in more measured tones. It also retained the WNMA’s argument concerning typical Virginia plantation houses. Even so, these concessions were not enough to keep the WNMA’s anger at bay.99

In January 1939, the WNMA bypassed the NPS completely and wrote directly to Virginia Senator Carter Glass complaining that the sign “is in direct opposition to the aims and objectives of the” Association and “neither does it agree with Secretary Wilbur’s speech of acceptance when this property was presented to the United States government by the above named association in 1932.”100 Responses arrived from Senator Glass and Assistant Secretary of the Department of the Interior Oscar L. Cloperman, but neither satisfied the WNMA.101 Undeterred, the WNMA turned to their old mainstay, Charles Hoppin. In typical fashion, Hoppin issued a scathing letter to Josephine Rust’s widower—who had since become the WNMA’s secretary—attempting to discern exactly what the situation was at Washington’s birthplace.102 Some portion of this outcry must have caught the NPS’s ear for in October 1939, following a visit to the park, Acting Assistant Director J. R. White wrote to Hough, “the wording of the sign at

99 In his May 1938 SMR, Hough remarked, “The new sign...has distinctly met with unfavorable reaction by the public. However, we believe that it is necessary—like it or not—and that the simple truth should hurt no honest person.” This comment may suggest a shift in Hough’s opinion of the Building X controversy.
100 Ames to Glass, 7 January 1939, NPS Records 6/25, GEWA.
101 Minutes of the WNMA, 1 March 1939, WNMA Records 18/25, GEWA.
102 Hoppin to Rust, 1939, NPS Records 6/25, GEWA.
the park entrance, particularly where it says, 'This house is neither a reproduction nor a facsimile of the original,' is most deterrent to travel. I shall take up with the director the possibility of changing the wording on this sign."103 Records do not reveal whether or not the NPS changed the text of their new sign, but they do indicate that the sign was removed in 1946.104 Not until March 1953 did the Monument erect a sign that satisfied the WNMA:

George Washington was born in a house on these grounds, February 22, 1732, and spent the first three years of his life here at his father's plantation on Popes Creek. According to tradition, the birthplace house, the appearance of which is unknown, was burned on Christmas Day, 1779. The present memorial house was built by the Wakefield National Memorial Association under authority of an Act of Congress approved in 1926. Here one may feel, and catch the spirit of, the Colonial Virginia that molded Washington, the boy and the man.105

Thus, in a rhetorical shift not unlike Hough's following the release of Rodnick's orientation report, the project of historical meaning making at Washington's birthplace abandoned claims to authenticity and refocused itself once again on the loci sanctorum first identified and commemorated by Custis over a century earlier.

**Building X and Remembering**

The battle over signs and meaning at Washington's birthplace reveals the complexity and diversity of interests at the Monument during its first two decades of operation. Rust, Moore, and Hoppin all harbored different ideas about proper commemoration and, therefore, make it impossible to assign to the WNMA a singular historical vision. The NPS also had its share of internal debates. Hough's disagreement

---

103 "Park entrance" in this context refers to the entrance to the core historic area which was more-or-less immediately in front of the Memorial House. White to Hough, 17 October 1939, Records of the National Park Service NE Region, Central Classified Files, 1936-1952, RG 79, NAMAR.

104 NPS Records 9/25, GEWA contains lengthy correspondence regarding the sign problem during the 1940s.

with his superiors concerning appropriate treatment of Building X and the Memorial House demonstrates that we must be careful to not mistake Agency policy for Agency consensus. Nonetheless, the Building X saga offers a fascinating glimpse into the process by which early professional public historians and archeologists discussed and battled over issues like authenticity and memory during the 1930s and 40s.

To learn from this episode, however, we must consider a central question: why, in the face of conflicting evidence, did the WNMA continue with its commemorative project and insist upon the legitimacy of its Memorial House? As we have seen, Moore, Donn, and Taylor all had reservations about the form and location of the house. As historian Joy Beasley argues, the very term “Building X” indicated an at least partial recognition of the site’s probable importance. After all, other sites uncovered during preliminary archeological investigations included a so-called “ice house” and a “barn site,” although no more evidence existed to support these conclusions than what had been discovered at the Building X site. Given these very real concerns, we must wonder why neither the NPS nor the WNMA took steps to postpone construction. In hindsight, Donn’s justification of the Memorial House’s location rings strikingly naïve for an architect supposedly well-versed in colonial Virginia architecture. And Hoppin’s arguments clearly served to protect the famously irascible historian’s own reputation.

Most notable among the voices missing from these early conversations are those of Josephine Rust and Horace Albright. Rust had fallen ill by the time of the Building X discovery and would soon die; it is likely that the WNMA sheltered her from controversy during her last days. Albright’s silence regarding the Building X question is also understandable in hindsight. The WNMA sought to complete its project by 1932 in time

for the Washington Bicentennial, which had already begun to generate national excitement. The director understood that the free publicity afforded by the Bicentennial would bolster the NPS's debut on the historic preservation scene. Given the NPS's lack of resources, both human and financial, Albright had no choice but to follow the WNMA's lead to have the site ready in such short order. Moreover, the fields of historical preservation and historical archeology had only begun to be professionalized by the early 1930s and it was not then immediately evident what was at stake at Wakefield. The NPS certainly did not possess the sort of professional staff necessary to undertake such a project and perhaps underestimated the WNMA's determination and ability to leave its own mark on the monument.

Or, should I say, the NPS underestimated the mark left by Custis. Ultimately, the story of Washington's birthplace and of Building X is a story about two very different organizations vying for two very different kinds of memories. We have discussed how the NPS preferred a sort of non-local way of remembering manifest in an emergent professionalism concerned with material exactitude and historical authenticity; the sort of concerns that caused NPS landscape architect Charles Peterson to accuse the WNMA of perpetuating "a great archeological crime." The WNMA, however, shared in an older tradition of object fetishism first introduced at Wakefield by George Washington Parke Custis in 1815. That tradition privileged proximity, local knowledge, and reverence. The WNMA intended the Memorial House to be something of an elaboration of the Custis stone; a shrine rather than a structure, a play of spaces that imparted to visitors through physical immersion important lessons about the past. Those lessons were admittedly tailored to imply that Washington was great because he benefited from the moral
integrity of a specifically white upper class (hence the undue grandeur of the Memorial House). Despite working so closely with one another, the two organizations never fully understood one another and the NPS certainly never realized that, when Superintendent Hough—who himself considered Washington’s birthplace a loci sanctorum—called people like Rodnick “scholarly but [of] limited vision and appreciation,” he was not simply being stubborn, but rather attempting to draw attention to other ways of remembering.

And to make things even more confusing, both organizations found themselves confronted with the wholly unanticipated burden of creating a frame powerful enough to contain and control two sacred objects: the Memorial House and Building X. The WNMA had so effectively undertaken the process of sight sacralization, that by the time they had discovered the actual object of their commemorative focus, the Memorial House had already begun to stand on its own claims to authenticity. Perhaps this is why Charles Hoppin was so adamantly opposed to recognizing the obvious importance of Building X—although it was the “real” thing, it threatened to compromise the Memorial House’s complex regime of meaning. And, to the WNMA, that meaning placed the ultimate stamp of authenticity on Washington’s birthplace. In a way, the WNMA did its commemorative work so well that it no longer needed Washington’s birthplace to communicate the importance of Washington’s birthplace. Building X, just like Albright’s landscape architects and archeologists, simply threatened to collapse the Memorial House’s delicate mnemonic architecture.

That threat prevented both the WNMA and the NPS from ever managing to complete the process of sight sacralization begun at Washington’s birthplace.
MacCannell contends that the fifth and final step in that process occurs when "groups, cities, and regions begin to name themselves after" the sight—what he calls social reproduction. Wakefield received some attention in this regard. Superintendent reports include occasional references to visitors looking to build private homes that replicate the Memorial House and, on one occasion, a local fire station modeled its annual Fourth of July parade float on the Memorial House. But, beyond these few instances, Washington's birthplace settled into several decades of commemorative indecision and, at times, relative obscurity following Rodnick's report. In fact, not until recently have signs been installed along Virginia's so-called King's Highway directing tourists to Washington's birthplace. This is not to say, however, that Hough, the NPS, or the WNMA surrendered their various claims to authority at Popes Creek. On the contrary, each deployed increasingly sophisticated rationale for their particular commemorative impulses predicated on, as we will see in the following chapter, clear ideas about the proper role and function of historic objects.

CHAPTER IV
A CONTEST OF RELICS

What is most remarkable about the Building X crisis at Washington's birthplace is that both the WNMA and the NPS emerged relatively unscathed from the opening volleys in this battle over authenticity. In fact, both organizations, despite their differences, managed to hammer out a relatively peaceful working relationship between 1930 and 1955. This achievement reveals the sincere commitment of both groups to presenting a compelling story about George Washington. But it also points to the considerable practical challenges then facing both organizations. Just as the WNMA and the NPS squared off over Building X and the nature of authenticity, crowds of curious travelers raised very real questions about how to manage the Park. Approximately one hundred and twenty thousand visitors tromped through the Memorial House, used park facilities, and picnicked on Monument grounds between 1931 and 1933. Superintendent Hough balked at the throngs of visitors who requested information pamphlets faster than the park could produce them.¹ If the NPS and the WNMA were going to get their

¹ SMR, May 1933, NPS Records, GEWA. Illegitimate visitors also created problems and, during a single week in 1933, the Monument contended with trespassers on four consecutive nights including one who pulled down a length of fence “to get a party of ladies into the grounds.” See SMR, April 1933, NPS Records, GEWA.
particular historical narratives into circulation, the first step was to accommodate the public.

To that end, Hough discovered an unlikely ally in the WNMA's new president. The WNMA limped along for several years after Rust's death until Charles Moore convinced Louise DuPont Crowninshield to head the organization in 1935. Although a rising star in the world of historic preservation, Crowninshield lacked Rust's unflagging commitment to all things Washington. She was, however, committed to authenticity and had earned a well-deserved reputation for her tasteful yet accurate furnishing of colonial domestic interiors. But unlike her male peers whose cold professionalism frequently alienated ladies associations, Crowninshield understood the motivations of her commemorative predecessors. By spanning both worlds, she returned to Washington's birthplace some of its former notoriety in museum circles. Over time, however, Crowninshield's faith in the authentic object competed against the regimes of relational meaning created by Rust's symbolic objects and all but obliterated Hough's ongoing search for true objects.

Object theory notwithstanding, Crowninshield brought two resources to the park that instantly endeared her to Hough: money and support. Accommodating visitors was no easy task during the depression-wracked 1930s. The NPS struggled with financial shortfalls and labor shortages throughout the system.² The popularity of the park system itself contributed to the problem. Americans hit hard by depression found in national

² Understaffing constituted a significant problem throughout the park system during the 1920s and 30s when early hopes for a self-sustaining NPS faded as visitation increases outpaced congressional generosity. See Carr, Wilderness by Design, 87, 90.
parks and monuments an affordable escape from every-day concerns. But increased visitation meant increased demands on park resources. As we have already seen, President Roosevelt's New Deal buoyed Monument initiatives throughout the 1930s. CCC Camp SP-19, just a few miles distant, provided invaluable assistance that Hough hailed as "of outstanding importance to us." U.S. entry into World War II, however, put an end to federal relief and additionally forced non-military governmental organizations to tighten their belts. In 1941, just as Congress cut park appropriations in half, system-wide visitation peaked at over twenty-one million. Not only did the war effort require money, it also required men. Rangers and support staff enlisted in droves thereby causing full-time NPS employment to plunge over fifty percent by 1943. NPS Director Newton Drury fought hard to protect historic resources at a time when Civil War cannons at sites like Gettysburg National Military Park were often valued more as scrap metal than as educational tools. But the Agency’s battle for self preservation exerted extreme

---

3 Ise, Our National Park Policy, 326. The NPS actually expanded during the Depression. Americans looking for affordable vacations filled national parks and Washington recognized the power of these sites to bolster faith in American values. Ethan Carr attributes President Roosevelt's consolidation of the system in 1933 to a conscious investment in American identity. See Carr, Wilderness by Design, 255-56.

4 The CCC played a vital role in rescuing the NPS from the ravages of economic collapse. By 1935, the organization operated 600 camps like SP-19 with nearly 120,000 workers. Of the 6,000 professionals hired to supervise CCC projects, many became life-long NPS employees thereby fundamentally influencing the agency's character in years to come. At Washington's birthplace, federal and local work programs provided a variety of labor and, in one case, even secured the Monument a trained tour guide. The local state reemployment committee hired Robert Bruce Mass from nearby Mount Holly, VA and Hough put Mass to work "learning the story of Wakefield." See Mackintosh, The National Parks: Shaping the System, 46. Regarding Mass, see SMR, December 1933, NPS Records, GEWA.

5 Ise, Our National Park Policy, 448. U.S. entry into World War II translated, for the NPS, into a reduction of appropriations from $21 million in 1940 to $5 million in 1943, a nearly fifty-percent reduction in full-time employees, and reductions in overall visitation from 21 million in 1941 to six million in 1942. Moreover, NPS headquarters were banished to a Chicago warehouse until 1947 so as to free up space in Washington for war-related government operations. For this information and the reference to Drury's protection of resources during wartime, see Mackintosh, The National Parks: Shaping the System, 47.
pressures on small parks like Washington's birthplace where as few as three permanent employees were on hand at any given time.\textsuperscript{7}

Although the park struggled to accommodate visitors before the war, it tried desperately to attract them during the war. About sixty thousand people visited the Monument in 1940. That number plunged to fifteen thousand just one year later. Nationwide tax increases and gasoline rationing explain this initial decline. In time, tire rationing and federal restrictions on unnecessary travel made it all but illegal to visit remote NPS sites like Washington's birthplace. Only eight thousand visitors made the trek in 1942. In March 1942, Hough noticed an “unusual trend in travel...the appearance of visitors on bicycles.”\textsuperscript{8} Allied victories in Italy and Russia bolstered morale on the home front and visitation increased beginning in October 1943. By spring 1945, with Allied victory looming on the horizon, visitation quadrupled almost overnight. The official end of hostilities in Europe and the Pacific—and the consequent end of gasoline rationing—brought nearly forty thousand visitors to the Park by the end of 1946.\textsuperscript{9} But, once again, the rise accompanied consistently bleak financial forecasts. Congressional appropriations for NPS sites remained modest in light of pressing war debts as nearly

\textsuperscript{7} In addition to Phillip Hough, who arrived in 1932 and assumed control as the Park's first full-time superintendent, Harold Broderick joined the staff as senior gardener on December 7, 1931 and Janie Mason, employed by the WNMA, served as hostess and default supervisor of the Memorial House. SMR, December 1931, NPS Records, GEWA. Aside from Hough and Broderick, the NPS employed only one other full-time laborer and hired various per diem workers when necessary. SMR, July 1931 & November 1931, NPS Records, GEWA. NPS Associate Engineer Robert White, who briefly managed the Park prior to Hough's arrival, complained about understaffing as early as April 1931 when, aside from himself, only one other full-time laborer attended “to all the various duties of maintenance and protection.” SMR, April 1931, NPS Records, GEWA. The addition of gardener Broderick may have eased the problem, but not for long. NPS Office Order No. 234, issued in 1932, required each park to designate a point-of-contact for wildlife issues. Hough assigned the responsibility to Broderick thereby reducing the amount of time the gardener could devote to gardening. SMR, February 1932, NPS Records, GEWA. By late 1932, Hough complained of “embarrassing” conditions wherein administrative, clerical, landscaping, and Memorial Mansion duties fell to only three regular employees, none of whom were trained as rangers or historians. SMR, October 1941, December 1941, and March 1942.

\textsuperscript{8} SMR, October 1943, May 1945, and August 1946.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
twenty two million visitors glutted the system in 1946.\textsuperscript{10} Visitation at the Birthplace, which had averaged around fifty thousand per year during the 1930s, plateaued at nearly seventy thousand during the 1950s.\textsuperscript{11}

Throughout it all, Phillip Hough remained a model superintendent. During the lean war years, Hough lectured at schools and throughout the community to keep alive local interest in the Birthplace.\textsuperscript{12} He stayed in touch with former employees deployed abroad and once received a "bashed-in" German helmet from former Ranger Paul Dewitt.\textsuperscript{13} But the long hours and constant anxiety took a toll on Hough. He endured major surgery in 1942 for a list of problems involving his gall bladder, appendix, and stomach. But not until his last years did Hough express any real pessimism about the future of the Birthplace. During the summer of 1952, an exasperated Hough quipped, "all hands were more than busy, this time especially the superintendent, who just could not run the area and keep up with the demands for extra paperwork." Hough died of a sudden heart attack just days before Christmas day 1953.\textsuperscript{14}

**Symbols, Icons, and Indices**

And so ended an important era at Washington's birthplace, one bracketed by the deaths of two formative leaders: Josephine Wheelwright Rust in 1931 and Phillip Hough

\textsuperscript{10} Ise, *Our National Park Policy*, 455.
\textsuperscript{11} The return of busses heralded this boom at the Monument. Thirty busses full of school children visited the Monument in May 1947. Greyhound resumed bus services to Wakefield from both Richmond and Washington in 1946 and indicated its interest in creating a permanent shuttle bus. For various remarks concerning increased visitation, see SMR, May 1947, January 1946, January 1948, September 1949, and August 1949. Also see SAR, 1950.
\textsuperscript{12} See SAR, 1940 for example of Hough's annual speaking schedule.
\textsuperscript{13} SMR, September 1945.
\textsuperscript{14} Hough registers this complaint in SMR, July 1952. Hough's death resounded throughout the community he served for over two decades and his temporary replacement, Acting Superintendent Joseph Vaughn, was certainly not alone in likening Hough's death to the events of another storied Christmas: "The sadness prevailing at George Washington's birthplace during the 1953 Christmas was perhaps paralleled to the one of 174 years ago when the Washington Home was destroyed by fire on a date considered to be Christmas Day, 1779." See SMR, December 1953.
nearly two decades later. As we have seen, Rust's role in refocusing national attention on Washington's birthplace set the parameters through which the legacy of Custis's first stone persisted. That legacy did not die with her, but found new expression through the work of Louise du Pont Crowninshield. Crowninshield, through her close professional relationship with Hough, presided over goings-on at the Monument during a time when house museums and patriotic tourism were no longer novel concepts. Rust and her associates had represented the trailing edge of the nation's first formative wave of historic preservationists. They belonged among the ranks of those responsible for Mount Vernon and Colonial Williamsburg. Crowninshield certainly shared in that tradition, but her presidency unfolded amid a second stage in the evolution of the historic preservation movement. Historic house museums proliferated at mid century. Between 1945 and 1950, for instance, at least twenty new house museums appeared in this country.15 Those museums often implied that American postwar power could be credited to the foresight and greatness of the country's colonial forbearers. Hough himself valued visits by servicemen because, in his words, "such visits will inspire patriotism among the men of our armed forces."16 Even the American Association of Museums declared its intent to "fortify the spirit on which Victory depends" in 1941 and Colonial Williamsburg offered its services as a site for military wartime orientation.17

15 Stuart Hobbs provides this figure in "Exhibiting Antimodernism: History, Memory, and the Aestheticized Past in Mid-twentieth-century America" The Public Historian 23:3 (Summer 2001), 42.
16 SMR, August 1941. A significant portion of visitors during this period included military personnel. By August 1945, Popes Creek began "to receive numbers of returned men—some ex prisoners of war from Germany. We do nothing to encourage them to talk about it but some men seem to want to tell you, so we listen with sympathy." SMR, August 1945.
17 Patricia West notes that although museum curators feared accusations of blatant nationalism before and during the war—given the use of state museums by Europe's various totalitarian regimes—appealing to patriotic themes could in some cases secure funding during a time of slim congressional appropriations. West, Domesticating History, 134.
Historian Stuart Hobbs argues that this rapid expansion witnessed two important changes in postwar museums. On one hand, he argues, museum historians came to understand themselves as functionally and intellectually different from academic historians who traditionally privileged textual documents as historical evidence. Rather, museum historians recognized in their work a kinship with art historians who had developed a language and methodologies for interpreting *objets d'art* just like the furniture and decorative arts displayed in house museums. At the same time and because they had become so immersed within the world of antique objects, museum historians rejected the postwar gospel of technology. As American’s increasingly understood technological and scientific progress as the key to a positive future, museum historians posited themselves as antimodernists privy to the secrets of a more desirable premodern past. Hobbs includes among his evidence for this claim the writings of NPS historian J. Paul Hudson who worked closely with Hough to create a short-lived museum exhibit at Washington’s birthplace.18

Louise Crowninshield’s role at Washington’s birthplace demonstrates that, at least for our story, Hobbs’s argument rings true. An expert in colonial decorative arts, Crowninshield—who is best known for her affiliation with the Winterthur and Hagley Museums in Delaware—secured for the birthplace substantial credibility in museum circles at a time before academic historians took the study of American material culture seriously. Under Rust, the WNMA had decorated its Memorial House with whatever antiques and reproductions—in some cases, culled from members’ attics19—they felt best

---

19 The significance of donation should not be overlooked here. Just as we saw out-of-state historical associations pay for commemorative “ownership” of object in the Memorial House in chapter two, WNMA
approximated a domestic space befitting Washington's good character. To this extent, good taste and physical comfort—what we might call "charm"—typified the Association's decorative methodology. Crowninshield also valued charm, but only second to authenticity. Starting from scratch, Crowninshield redecorated the Memorial House using nothing but antiques appropriate to the years the Washington family lived at Popes Creek. In doing so, she staked the WNMA and, consequently, the Park's reputation on material and historical authenticity—a bold initiative at a site nagged from the beginning by questions of authenticity.

Thanks to Crowninshield's work, Washington's birthplace successfully laid claim to, odd as it may seem, a reputation for authenticity in respected curatorial circles. This is not to say that the WNMA's old decorative sensibility yielded entirely to Crowninshield's approach. The Wakefield ladies still valued charm and, following Rust's death, sought to assert it in an entirely new domestic space. In 1932, the Association dedicated itself to the construction and decoration of the Log House Tea Room, a lodge and restaurant built for visitors in memory of the Association's first president. But, as the Building X controversy unfolded throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the Log House became the epicenter of a new though not wholly unrelated battle for authority at Wakefield. This time, the point of contention was not historical objects, but rather ownership of furnishings purchased for the Log House by the WNMA in honor of Rust. The Association's concern for these new objects was only different in substance from its earlier concerns about the design and location of the Memorial House. In the latter case, their concern was to properly honor George Washington. The battle for members took seriously the duty of providing proper objects for Washington's birth home—and it is likely that one's status within the Association benefited accordingly.
ownership of the Log House furnishings was essentially a battle to ensure Rust's own commemoration. As we will see, the Log House episode—just like the Memorial House and Building X sagas—reveals the persistence of old ideas about objects and meaning.

In fact, it is possible at this point in our story, to identify three strains of object reverence in competition at Washington’s birthplace during its formative years. In the introduction, I referred to the Park’s history as one overwhelmed by the failure of radical signification—the inability of either the NPS or the WNMA to conjure a regime of meaning strong enough to rebury Building X and make legitimate the Memorial House’s tangled web of meaning. We witnessed in chapter three the opening volleys of that battle during which, for example, the WNMA and the NPS struggled against one another to craft a suitable text for the Memorial House’s interpretive sign. But, there is another model for thinking about signs outside of their literal and linguistic manifestations.

Charles Sander Peirce (1839-1914), an American logician and mathematician, is perhaps best known as the father of Pragmatism and, secondly, for his theory of signs. Unlike Ferdinand de Saussure, whose linguistic theory of signs underlies most recent cultural and literary studies concerned with meaning and discourse, Peirce was interested in a theory of signs that unfolded throughout the material world, not just within a discursive reality. His work thus attempted to describe in an intimidating array of triadic structures, all possible permutations of semiotic activity in a world characterized—so argued Peirce—by unlimited semiosis. It was a big project and one that Peirce, unsurprisingly, never finished.

---

He did however get far enough to provide us with a handy model for thinking about three kinds of objects—what, for our purposes, I will call relics—that came into competition at Washington's birthplace during the 1930s and, in many ways, continue to vie with one another today. Peirce described three types of signs: symbolic, iconic, and indexical. Symbolic signs are familiar to students of Saussure. Symbols are bundles of meaning tied to objects or concepts to which they have no necessary relationship. So, a Cadillac may be a symbol of wealth even though there is no necessary or immediate relationship between the thousands of interlocking parts we call a car and the consequent construction of socioeconomic class difference. At Wakefield, the WNMA—especially under Rust—staked its entire commemorative effort on the power of symbols. The Memorial House is an especially potent symbolic relic. Though having no necessary or immediate relationship to Washington or his actual birth house, the Memorial House conveyed important messages about both. Just like the Eucharist and the Virgin Mary statues of medieval Europe discussed in chapter one, symbolic relics served important mimetic ends at Washington’s birthplace and typified a strain of object reverence common to the opening acts of the Colonial Revival in this country.

Crowninshield’s arrival at Wakefield introduced another strain of object reverence predicated on what we might call iconic relics. Peirce defined icons as signs that closely resemble their objects. By his definition, portraits are examples of iconic signs as are mirror images, what semiotician Umberto Eco calls “absolute” icons. Crowninshield’s furnishings then, chosen as they were according to her strict criteria for temporal accuracy and overall authenticity, might be called iconic relics because they attempted to reproduce as closely as possible the material realities of their referents—the

---

actual long-vanished furnishings of Washington's birth house. Iconicity had, in fact, become the new standard for historical preservationists by the late 1930s and mastering it required extensive training and at least a nod to professionalism. But iconic relics are still relics and, as such, depend for their claims to authority upon interwoven threads of historical narrative and proximal accessibility. Crowninshield's iconic relics successfully vied against an older generation of symbolic relics for authority at Wakefield because she was equally fluent in the artifactual grammar of charm. It was precisely her combined mastery of iconicity and charm that distinguished Crowninshield amid the growing male cult of authenticity.

Symbolic and iconic relics are certainly not mutually exclusive, though, and both served various coincidental purposes at the Birthplace during the 1930s. The abyss of meaning left by the Building X controversy, however, created a power vacuum that forced symbolic and iconic relics into competition for historical authority. Because iconicity had come to typify a new professional approach to historic preservation, Crowninshield's relics ultimately found official favor at Washington's birthplace and set the stage for new regimes of meaning deployed at the Birthplace by the NPS during the 1960s and 1970s. There remained in competition, however, another kind of relic. Peirce describes indexical signs as those that have a direct physical relationship with their referents. Wind vanes, for example, indexically signify the wind as do thermometers the

22 For an interesting discussion of how Colonial Williamsburg struggled with authenticity and furnishings during its early days, see Camille Wells, "Interior Designs: Room Furnishings and Historical Interpretations at Colonial Williamsburg" in Southern Quarterly 31, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 89-111.

23 Curiously, too much charm could have exactly the opposite effect at museums of "high" art. Evelyn Hankins argues that the Whitney Museum of Art struggled to assert itself in New York's art scene during the 1930s because, unlike the stark markedly male modernism of museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, it displayed its objects in domestic settings. Consequently, the Whitney's objects—primarily American works—were "feminized" and denied artistic credibility. See Evelyn C. Hankins, "En/Gendering the Whitney's Collection of American Art," in Acts of Possession.
temperature. As translated into the language of relics, indexicality’s greatest hero at Washington’s birthplace was, oddly enough, Superintendent Hough.\textsuperscript{24} Hesitant as he was to acknowledge Building X’s significance, Hough remained fiercely committed to making public the archeological remains of the Washington family’s tenure at Popes Creek. He believed that establishing the authenticity of the Birthplace required a display of indexical relics—the actual material remains of Washington’s life at Wakefield.\textsuperscript{25} Despite his commitment to that project, neither the NPS nor the WNMA substantially aided Hough in his struggle and the Park has never built a museum of the variety Hough imagined. Indexicality at Washington’s birthplace has thus yielded to iconicity and, in the pages ahead, we will examine the process by which that contest unfolded.

The Log House Tea Room and the Persistence of Symbolic Relics

The most powerful of all relics in play at Washington’s birthplace in 1932 was, of course, the Memorial House. The WNMA had by-and-large weathered the storm brought on by the discovery of Building X and though having lost its leader in the process, it amassed considerable clout at Wakefield through the success and staying power of this primary relic. But the WNMA never intended to stop there. Ever since its founding in 1923, the WNMA imagined Washington’s birthplace as a prominent tourist destination complete with its own restaurant and lodge. Early development plans also proposed a log

\textsuperscript{24} For our purposes, “indexicality” refers to a representative object’s capacity to materially resemble or replicate a pure original. Put to this use, “indexicality” does not carry with it the linguistic meaning conveyed by its use in the work of sociologist Harold Garfinkel who is noted for arguing that all social behavior and all communicative acts are, on some level, indexical. This is not to say that Garfinkel’s work is irrelevant. Rather, my purpose here—and thus my reason for couching this analysis in Peirce’s semiotic rather than Saussure’s—is to recover the non-linguistic origins of meaning in human/object interactions. For a general overview of the function of indexicals, see David Kaplan, “Demonstratives,” in Almog, et al., eds., \textit{Themes from Kaplan} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). Concerning Garfinkel’s work, see his \textit{Studies in Ethnomethodology} (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967); and “Studies in the Routine Grounds of Everyday Activities,” in D. Sudnow, ed., \textit{Studies in Social Interaction} (New York: The Free Press, 1972).

\textsuperscript{25} Recall from chapter three that repeated excavations undertaken toward clarifying the Building X situation left Hough’s hands full of indexical relics.
cabin to honor the area's earliest European inhabitants. In the wake of Rust's death, those two plans merged into a single commemorative gesture, the Log House Tea Room. With obvious reference to the colonial teas and colonial kitchens of the preceding decade, the Log House Tea Room (also known as the Log Lodge) blended commemorative and historical motifs. Though specifically built by the Association in honor of Rust, the WNMA justified its rustic log cafeteria, gift shop, and hostelry on claims that a log house once stood on the spit of land called Duck Hall.

The WNMA hired Jones & Conquest—the same firm who built the Memorial House—to build the Log House in April 1932. As with the Memorial House, the WNMA worked on a grand scale. The Log House, as its name suggests, is built of massive rough-hewn logs stacked one atop the other and dovetailed at the corners in traditional fashion. The effect is rustic and, with its sharp pitched roof, the Log House resembles the colonial kitchens built by revivalists during the previous century. Inside, however, the Log House is anything but primitive. Twin fireplaces bracket luxurious paneled walls beneath an impressive vaulted ceiling. Here, in what was the building's central dining and meeting room, exposed timber frames connote charm, not roughness (figure 17).

---

26 A recent cultural resource study undertaken at the Monument verifies that Duck Hall was in fact once home to colonial settlement although the only substantial material remains from that period of occupation were lost to the construction of a picnic area in 1931. Hough discovered the remains of a double fireplace there in 1934, but paid it surprisingly little notice. He all but ignored the skeletal remains of two bodies uncovered there in 1932 that were identified as African American by Smithsonian Institution Assistant Curator of Physical Anthropology T. Dale Stewart. Oculus, "Cultural Landscape Report," v. 1, 2.78-2.79. Hough described the discovery in SMR, July 1932: "In sinking the fuel oil tank at the log lodge two old graves were encountered. One skull was taken to the national museum for classification. In the absence of Dr. Hrdlika in Alaska, his assistant Dr. Stuart pronounced it that of a colored woman who had been buried at least 100 years. The skull was left at the museum for further study."

27 For discussion of the Log House during construction and comments regarding its intent as a tribute to Rust, see SMR, May, April, and July 1932, NPS Records, GEWA. A recent cultural resource study surmises that the WNMA's reference to a log house may mean the residence of Aitcheson Gray, a former resident at Duck Hall. See Oculus, "Cultural Landscape Report," v. 1, 2.66, n. 211.
In October 1932, the WNMA topped off its architectural homage to Rust and Washington's forbears with a dazzling array of hand-made solid black walnut furniture crafted especially for the Log House. A hundred pieces of custom furniture arrived that month complete with table linen, bedding, and kitchen equipment able "to feed an unlimited number." Later that year, NPS Director Horace Albright signed a contract putting Janie Mason in charge of the Log House. The particulars of the agreement are unclear. Mason was a member of the WNMA and had previously worked as a hostess in the Memorial House, but her contract with the NPS did not specify who exactly owned the Log House and its contents—had ownership of the Log House transferred to the NPS as with the Memorial House? And even though the WNMA outfitted the building with furniture and supplies, did those items actually belong to the Association or, had they become by way of donation, government property? NPS policy regarding concessionaires in Federal parks had yet to be standardized in 1932 and although the vagaries of this agreement were not unusual for the time, they would—as we will see—come back to haunt the park in decades to come.

The Log House, built atop a gusty bluff deep within Virginia's remote Northern Neck, opened for business in the middle of an especially harsh Chesapeake winter. Nobody should have been surprised by slow business that first season. But over time it became evident that the WNMA had misjudged the needs of its target clientele.  

---

28 SMR, October and December 1932, NPS Records, GEWA. NPS Records 7/25, GEWA contain a report on and photos of the Log House's construction.  
29 Hough mentions Mason's contract in his SMR, October 1932. Historian John Ise discusses the complexities and inconsistency of NPS concessionaire policy in the years immediately preceding the creation of the Monument. See, Ise, Our National Parks Policy, 209-12. Despite the ambiguity of arrangements at the Monument, it is important to note that the Log House was not atypical in that women have played a historically prominent role in operating NPS park concessions. See Polly Welts Kaufman, National Parks and the Woman's Voice, A History (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 153-54.
Although pretty and somewhat interesting—interpretive confusion aside—the Monument did not really offer much to see or do for most travelers. An hour was all anyone needed to see the house and walk around the grounds. That being the case, visitors rarely stayed at the Monument for very long. Superintendent Hough noticed that many visited while en route from Washington, DC to Colonial Williamsburg. Visitors at Washington’s birthplace wanted a pit stop, not a hotel and restaurant.

Business did not improve and, as the nation’s economic problems grew worse, the Log House increasingly tapped vital Monument resources. Mason’s transfer from the Memorial House to the Log House concerned Hough who worried about locking up the un-staffed mansion during emergencies, “a practice we know will have a bad effect if visitors arrive.”\footnote{SMR, November 1932, NPS Records, GEWA.} The WNMA announced its inability to further fund the business in 1934 and, despite a brief spike in business during 1937, care and maintenance of the Log House fell almost entirely to Hough’s staff.\footnote{Log House-related responsibilities included mowing, fence repair, and general building maintenance. See, for instance, SAR, 1934, NPS Records, GEWA; and Crowninshield to Hough, 3 May 1938, Ancient Box 6, GEWA.} Frustrated, Hough privately accused Mason of mismanagement and, in 1940, chastised her for not keeping adequate hours.\footnote{Hough kept a close eye on activities at the Log House and determined that its failure resulted primarily from a lack of advertising, excessive overhead considering its scant clientele, and poor location. Experiments with limited hours during the winter months did little to help the situation. Hough’s reports are full of comments regarding the Log House, see specifically SMR, July 1934, November 1934, January 1935, December 1935, October 1936, April 1937, and May 1937, NPS Records, GEWA. Hough to Mason, 25 June 1940, NPS Records 9/25, GEWA. This file also includes a wealth of documents regarding operation of the Log House including rates and monthly financial reports.} Mason replied coolly that “the last time we discussed the matter we agreed on six o’clock as the closing hour and I have never closed earlier...Often it is 6:30 or later.” She added, “I don’t see how I can comply with your request to stay open as long as you keep Wakefield open...The many nights I have spent here, have been in the public rest room,
which I do not think you would find many willing to do.” Mason resigned shortly thereafter and Hough lamented, “the Log House as it is cannot be an attractive business prospect, and how to improve it will be quite a problem.”

The financial strain wrought by World War II made improvement impossible. Park staff boarded up the building sometime around 1942 and the Log House remained dormant for the duration of the war. In the meantime, questions arose concerning ownership of the Log House furnishings. The NPS believed them to be government property, but the WNMA bellowed at the suggestion. In March 1942, WNMA President Crowninshield wrote to NPS Director Newton Drury and explained that, although the WNMA would discuss the matter at their April meeting, she doubted that the Wakefield ladies would consent to donation. She explained that “they still resent the sign, the doubt on the site, and proposed evacuation but I might be able to swing them.” Drury agreed to leave the issue until the WNMA had made a decision, but he also reminded Crowninshield of the Association’s responsibility to protect and maintain its property.

This exchange reveals that the Wakefield ladies remained upset with the NPS’s questioning of their historical authority at Wakefield. The WNMA had weathered both the sign crisis and the Building X debacle intact, but it emerged uncertain about its continued role at Washington’s birthplace. NPS interest in acquiring the Log House and its contents presented yet another threat to the WNMA’s sense of ownership at Wakefield. When Crowninshield agreed to lead the WNMA in 1935, she did not expect her responsibilities to extend beyond furnishing the Memorial House. However, the new

33 Mason to Hough, 29 June 1940; Hough to Mason, 26 November 1940; Hough to Director, 7 December 1940; and Mason to Hough, 3 December 1940, NPS Records 9/25, GEWA.
34 Crowninshield to Drury, 27 March 1942; and Drury to Crowninshield, 12 May 1942, NPS Records 6/25, GEWA.
president inherited a much more complicated situation than perhaps she expected and it is
in Crowninshield’s intent to “swing them” that we see the beginning of a new era at
Wakefield.

Louise du Pont Crowninshield and a New Professionalism

The demise of the Log House—a building erected in memory of Josephine
Wheelwright Rust—ushered in that new era and constituted a symbolic passing of the old
guard. Another very significant member of that old guard, Charles Moore, died in
September 1942, and with his death, the link to Rust and the days of early
commemoration grew increasingly tenuous.35 In June 1943, when a sycamore tree
planted in Rust’s honor on the front lawn of the Memorial House finally collapsed from
ice damage incurred the previous winter, Hough expressed “hope [that] nature will
produce a new leader and make it a fine tree again.”36 Unlike the sycamore, Rust could
never return. In her place, however, emerged a leader of exceptional qualification who
breathed life into the monument and demonstrated for the ladies of the WNMA new ways
for women to negotiate power with the NPS.

Not long after Rust’s death in 1931, NPS Associate Engineer Robert P. White
noticed a “lull in the cooperative work” between the WNMA and the NPS. Rust’s
passing, he thought, had undermined the “driving force behind the WNMA’s plan.”37
Charles Moore briefly assumed the presidency but quickly passed the position to Maude
Worthington, a Northern Neck resident and long-standing WNMA member who also

35 SMR, September 1942.
36 SMR, June 1943.
37 SMR, July 1931, NPS Records, GEWA.
found herself overwhelmed. The WNMA rallied behind the Log House, but what would become of the Memorial House? Though used by the Association to sell souvenirs and host annual birthday celebrations for George Washington, the Memorial House’s value as a relic stood to suffer from the skepticism of an ever concerned NPS.

Charles Moore, seeking a solution to this problem, reached out to a rising star in the world of historic preservation: Louise du Pont Crowninshield. Born Louise Evelina du Pont in 1877, Crowninshield and her younger brother Henry shared the fortunes of their family’s vast chemical and defense corporation. Both invested in posterity. Henry committed himself to the renovation of the family’s Winterthur estate in Delaware and chose as his inspiration the European country house tradition. What became the Winterthur Museum was then, as it is now, renowned for its vast collection of eighteenth and nineteenth-century period rooms and domestic furnishings. In the meantime, Louise lived the life of a wealthy debutante whose elaborate New York City coming out gala preceded marriage to Frank Crowninshield, a wealthy Harvard drop-out who sought adventure early in life with Theodore Roosevelt’s Rough Riders and, later, by voyaging in a replica of his great-great uncle’s storied yacht, Cleopatra’s Barge.

Nearly twenty years after she and Frank wed, Louise convinced her elderly father to reacquire the du Pont family’s original estate, Eleutherian Mills, which had been abandoned in 1890 following a disastrous gunpowder explosion. Louise cherished childhood memories of Eleutherian Mills and sought to revive the old place which had

---

38 Worthington held the position for almost two years, most of which she spent in England scouring antique shops and markets for appropriate antiques to furnish the Memorial House. Health and family concerns forced her to seek resignation in 1933. See Master Plan Development Outline, February 1952, NPS Records 8/25, GEWA.

39 Annual George Washington birthday celebrations became—and continue to be—a fixture at the Memorial House. Hough described the first in SMR, February 1935, GEWA.
since fallen into disrepair. In 1924, Louise began restoring the house to how it might have appeared when first occupied by the du Ponts in 1800. Frank amused himself by converting the estate’s old gunpowder mills to appear like the ruins of classical temples. The “remnants of the powder mills,” according to historian and colonial reviver Walter Muir Whitehill, “were transformed into a scene reminiscent of a Hubert Robert landscape.”

The transformation of Eleutherian Mills was similarly transformative for Louise Crowninshield. Although not professionally trained as a historian of early American decorative arts, Crowninshield became—by way of her great interest, involvement in, and generous patronage of the field—a well-respected authority. Her restoration of Eleutherian Mills and her involvement with her brother’s Winterthur project propelled Crowninshield into a prominent circle of historical preservationists who congregated around the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s American Wing. The American Wing, which opened in 1924, displayed meticulously contrived period rooms and constituted perhaps the most significant pillar of the Colonial Revival in this country at the time. Henry Francis Crowninshield routinely consulted the American Wing’s curators for help with his own work.

Also closely connected with the American Wing, and instrumental in shaping the Winterthur collection, was Louise’s close friend, Bertha Benkard. Benkard too was the privileged daughter of a wealthy family—hers from New York—and she, like Louise,

---


41 Much has been made of the American Wing’s significance to the Colonial Revival. For a good discussion of the American Wing, its ideological underpinnings, and wide influence of both, see Wendy Kaplan, “R.T.H. Halsey, An Ideology of Collecting American Decorative Arts” in *Winterthur Portfolio* 17:1 (Spring 1982): 43-53.
had become swept up by the Colonial Revival.\textsuperscript{42} When not helping Henry at Winterthur, Benkard assisted throughout the 1930s with the restoration and furnishing of Stratford Hall, the Lee family’s Virginia estate located not five miles from Wakefield. It is likely her connection to Benkard that first brought Crowninshield into the world of Washingtonia. At roughly the same time Benkard was working at Stratford, Crowninshield became involved with the furnishing of the Kenmore mansion in Fredericksburg, VA. Kenmore was once the home of George Washington’s sister Betty and her husband, Fielding Lewis. A Fredericksburg ladies association purchased the house in 1925 and soon thereafter asked Louise Crowninshield to furnish the building. In 1933, the \textit{Evening Journal} reported that “Mrs. Francis B. Crowninshield...and Mrs. H.H. Benkard, of New York, adviser for furnishing, have been busy at the historic mansion...rearranging the old furniture and properly placing new period pieces loaned by the Metropolitan Museum of New York.”\textsuperscript{43}

Crowninshield’s involvement with the Kenmore Association is significant for a number of reasons. First, it demonstrates an important and largely unacknowledged aspect of the shift toward professional house museum curatorship during the early 1930s. In previous decades, ladies associations like the Mount Vernon Ladies Association and the WNMA took it upon themselves to equip and furnish their house museums and colonial kitchens in whatever way they saw most fit. I argued in chapter two that, at

\textsuperscript{42} Hough mentions visits by Benkard in SMR, October 1935 and April 1940. Benkard—later Bertha Benkard-Rose—herself played a significant role in the Colonial Revival and the development of historic preservation in this country. Of most direct relevance to the Monument, Benkard-Rose assisted with the restoration of nearby Stratford Hall. She also supervised the restoration of Sagamore Hill, which has since become an NPS site. See “Mrs. Reginald P. Rose, 1906-1982,” \textit{Theodore Roosevelt Association Journal} (1982): 15-16.

\textsuperscript{43} “Local Folk Aid in Restoration Plan of Old Mansion” \textit{Evening Journal} (2 January 1933), Papers of Mrs. F.B. Crowninshield from her house at Eleutherian Mills, Montchanin, Delaware, Hagley Museum & Library.
Wakefield, the WNMA intended its Memorial House to convey important lessons about republican motherhood and domestic virtue through carefully arranged symbolic relics. Drawing from a long tradition of object fetishism, Rust certainly did not need anyone to tell her how best to communicate the significance of America’s past through the purposeful manipulation of historic objects.

But, as we saw in chapter two, a new breed of male museum professionals increasingly exerted control over the process of and intent behind historic preservation during the 1930s. Historian Charles Hosmer, whose *Preservation Comes of Age* (1981) has long been considered the authoritative history of historic preservation in this country, argues that John D. Rockefeller’s involvement with the Colonial Williamsburg restoration ushered in the “growth of professionalism” in historic preservation. Public works jobs created for out-of-work historians and architects during the Great Depression promoted the trend. Hosmer charts the professional rise of men like Fiske Kimball who, while director of the Pennsylvania Museum (now the Philadelphia Museum of Art) assumed a leadership role in the restoration of Jefferson’s Monticello and the Lee family’s Stratford Hall.44

Hosmer implies that serious and credible historic preservation only began with the rise of this new breed of professional men. But, as we have seen, organizations like the MVLA and the WNMA were quite serious about their work and, within the cultural and political milieu of their time, earned widespread credibility. The 1930s did not give birth to credibility; they did, however, herald a significant redefinition of the standards by

---

44 Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 866-73. Patricia West provides a more interesting discussion of Fiske Kimball who, when hired on at Monticello during the mid-1940s, exemplified the new “scientized historicism” which found ill favor with that historic home’s sponsoring ladies association. Patricia West, *Domesticating History*, 123-25.
which credibility was gauged. To this extent, the importance of men like John D. Rockefeller and Fiske Kimball lies in their promotion of what we might call the cult of authenticity.\textsuperscript{45} The contest of relics intensified during the 1930s. Ladies associations had long championed symbolic relics—historical objects that connoted in their form and relation to other historical objects meanings about the past. New professionals working at sites like Colonial Williamsburg increasingly privileged iconicity. No longer satisfied with evoking the past, the new professionals worked to replicate the material realities of the past as closely as possible. The Memorial House drew fierce criticism in the wake of the Building X discovery precisely because the NPS, whose officials counted among their ranks a number of professional men Hosmer discusses in his account, brought standards of credibility to Wakefield not shared by Rust and the WNMA. So, where the WNMA championed the mimetic function of symbolic relics, the NPS contested Rust's authority predicated on its investment in indexical relics, namely the “actual” remains of the “actual” birth house.

Moreover, the NPS’s attempt to assert its will at Wakefield by contesting the WNMA’s claim to historical authority unfolded along gendered lines. The new professionals Hosmer speaks of predicated their own claims to historical authority on their ability to discern the authentic from the inauthentic.\textsuperscript{46} To properly do that, however, one had to cultivate an encyclopedic knowledge of colonial lifeways and be able to apply that knowledge in the field. Amid the rapid expansion of educational programming and

\textsuperscript{45} This is not to say that the new generation of professional male historic preservationists was any “less motivated by the ideological expediency of charismatic ‘historic’ settings.” West, \textit{Domesticating History}, 94.

\textsuperscript{46} In addition to Kimball, Hosmer also discusses Jean Harrington, Ned Burns, Ronald Lee, and Charles Peterson. Lee and Peterson both received degrees from the University of Minnesota and set the stage for that school to produce a host of historians later employed by the NPS. Hosmer, \textit{Preservation Comes of Age}, 868-71.
pedagogical innovation of the Progressive years, professional certification increasingly required a university education. So, the ranks of emergent museum professionals would include only those individuals who could afford and or gain entry into suitable degree programs. During the early 1930s, membership in that elite group was still largely limited to white men.

There were, however, exceptions and Crowninshield ranks among the most important. That the Kenmore Association sought out Crowninshield—rather than rely upon their own preservative intuition—demonstrates that they understood her involvement as a sign of credibility within the then burgeoning world of historic preservation. In other words, Crowninshield occupied a professional space comparable to any man then working in the field. And the Kenmore Association was not alone in thinking this. The second reason why Crowninshield’s affiliation with the Kenmore Association is important to this story is because her activities in Fredericksburg brought her to the attention of Charles Moore. As chairman of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, Moore’s involvement in historic preservation was not limited to Wakefield. Moore had been involved with the Kenmore project as early as 1922 when he, along with then vice-president Calvin Coolidge and other dignitaries, visited Fredericksburg to help initiate a fund drive to acquire the Kenmore Mansion. In 1935, Moore formally contacted Crowninshield and requested that she consider taking the lead at Wakefield. She agreed and her involvement consequently marked the beginning of a long period of interpretive recalibration at Washington’s birthplace.

Crowninshield’s role in shaping important sites of public memory must therefore be recognized. Although historic authority increasingly became the domain of male professionals during the 1930s, it was not theirs alone. In fact, Moore’s tapping of Crowninshield for the WNMA presidency suggests that he considered her better qualified for the job than her male peers. After all, Moore certainly could have appealed to any number of male historians then desperate for work in the lean years of the Great Depression. What set Crowninshield apart was her ability to unite old and new ideas about historic objects. Moore explained his choice in 1935: “it seemed wise to write to Mrs. Francis Crowninshield in regard to the Wakefield work...it was not money that we needed, but interest, good judgment, and knowledge, also the ability to give charm to a room even with simple things. This seems to be her particular forte.”

What set Crowninshield apart, then, was her knowledge and her appreciation for charm. But, what exactly is charm? Crowninshield herself offered a definition during a public address about the challenges facing preservationists: “The public won’t go to see a house just because of its architectural features...It must have a certain charm—the rouge pots and sewing baskets and all the little things through which today’s people feel they are connected to yesterday’s people...Attention to detail, therefore, is a constant necessity.” Charm, as Crowninshield understood it, exists in an appreciation for meaning conveyed through carefully planned spaces and well-placed objects. Charm is the power of select objects to extend humans into larger communities of historical

49 “Mrs. Crowninshield Tells of Restoration Problems,” an unidentified newspaper article in Papers of Mrs. F.B. Crowninshield from her house at Eleutherian Mills, Montchanin, Delaware, Hagley Museum & Library.
belonging. Just like medieval reliquaries and the curiosity cabinets of the early modern
Europe, Crowninshield’s rouge pots and sewing baskets functioned like prosthesis that
allowed their users entry into a cherished past. Crowninshield did not introduce charm to
Washington’s birthplace. The WNMA had mastered the idea long before. She did,
however, heighten charm’s credibility within the museum world by filtering it through
her own encyclopedic knowledge of colonial furnishings. In other words, Crowninshield
briefly bridged the mnemonic gender divide at Washington’s birthplace by, literally,
charming the icon. In her masterful union of symbolism and iconicity, Crowninshield
strengthened the Memorial House’s relic value and set the stage for new interpretive
directions that we will discuss in chapter five.

Her accomplishment did not go unnoticed and, consequently, Crowninshield
found herself drawn further into historic preservation, especially at sites owned and
operated by the NPS. In time, she became president of the National Council for Historic
Sites and Buildings, one of the first trustees of the National Trust for Historic
Preservation, and the namesake of that organization’s most prestigious award, the Louise
Evalina du Pont Crowninshield Award for preservation and interpretation of significant
historic and cultural resources.50 Her impact was as immediate as it was widespread.

Just months after Crowninshield signed on at Wakefield, Joseph Downs—head curator of
the Met’s American Wing—visited the park and “expressed himself in highly favorable
terms of what the government has begun here at Washington’s birthplace and in a general

50 Beyond Washington’s birthplace, Crowninshield contributed to a number of NPS projects at sites
including the Salem Maritime National Historic Site and the Saugus Iron Works National Historic Site.
Both of these are located in Massachusetts near Crowninshield’s Marblehead summer home. For an
overview of Crowninshield’s career, see Kim Burdick, “Louise’s Legacy” Delaware Today (June 2000):
142-46. Also see Hosmer, Preservation Comes of Age, 175-76, 656, 913, 924. My thanks to Dave Kayser
of the Salem Maritime Museum and Curtis White of Saugus Iron Works National Historic Site for
information concerning Crowninshield’s activities at those sites.
way of its accomplishment to date.” In turn and, perhaps eager to maintain ties with the American Wing, Hough traveled north “primarily to study colonial period exhibits at the metropolitan museum of art in New York.”51 In this way, a sleepy backwater monument found itself instantly intertwined with the avant-garde of American museums.

Crowninshield put Washington’s birthplace on the map of important historic preservation sites by linking it, through her presence, to other significant events and individuals in the field.

New Leaders, New Relics

Publicity and notoriety aside, Crowninshield’s primary charge was to furnish the Memorial House. Before she arrived in 1935, the Memorial House contained a variety of makeshift reproduction furniture and furnishings including a particularly idiosyncratic bearskin rug received from Yellowstone National Park. As soon as she arrived, Crowninshield announced her intent to keep “the relics and furniture of the period prior to 1753 when George Washington was a child. She wished to have only original pieces and dispose of all reproductions.”52 By the end of 1936, Crowninshield had nearly completed furnishing three of the house’s four upstairs rooms with hundreds of furniture pieces and decorative flourishes.53 For over five years, she flooded the Monument with furnishings carefully selected and purchased—mostly at her own expense though also with funds generated by the WNMA through contributions and fund-raising events—from collections throughout the eastern states and Europe. Monthly shipments of furnishings arrived with instructions for positioning each item in the Memorial House. By 1940, the Memorial House interior reflected, to the best of anyone’s knowledge, the

51 SMR, November 1935, GEWA.
52 Minutes of the WNMA, 25 April 1938, NPS Records, Unprocessed Material 18/37, GEWA.
53 For fiscal year 1936 status report with detailed list of furnishings, see SAR, 1936.
material world of a well-to-do mid-eighteenth-century Virginia plantation family. Hough recorded the long list of new furnishings donated by Crowninshield in his 1940 Annual Report and photographs of the Memorial House interior make clear its radical transformation (figure 18). Just as Crowninshield brought Washington's birthplace into the vanguard of historical preservation, she set a formative example of leadership for the Wakefield ladies. At first, nobody—not even Charles Moore—expected Crowninshield to do more than furnish the Memorial House. Moore specifically cautioned Hough that “she is a very busy woman and has many interests, and it is not desirable to bother her with … general business.” But both Hough and the WNMA found a fast friend and supporter in Louise Crowninshield. Beyond her obvious clout and knowledge, Crowninshield was a fresh voice in an old debate. She recognized that the Memorial House was not “authentic,” but insisted with others that it was properly located. She disliked Rodnick’s investigation and felt that it constituted an unnecessary interruption of the Monument’s rural calm. At the same time, Crowninshield had escaped the venom of an earlier WNMA. In what must have been a pleasant turn for everyone involved, Crowninshield

54 Acting NPS Director J.R. White recognized Crowninshield’s impressive contributions and thanked her on behalf of the NPS. See White to Crowninshield, 18 August 1939, Records of the National Park Service NE Region, RG 79, NAMAR. Hough mentioned Crowninshield’s visits in his monthly reports as in October 1935 when she “visited to install new antique furnishings for the restored mansion” with her friend, Bertha Benkard. Hough’s 1940 Annual Report indicates that Crowninshield had completed work on the Memorial House and was “acquiring furnishings for the Memorial Kitchen which it expects to complete as soon as we can supply space for our temporary museum, which now occupies the principal room.” See SAR, 1940 for a list of furnishings then on display in the Memorial House.  
55 Moore to Hough, 20 April 1935, Ancient Box 6, GEWA. 
56 In a letter to Director Demaray, Crowninshield comments that “the house is not the original one—although, I firmly believe [it is] on the exact foundation.” Crowninshield to Demaray, 26 October 1938, National Park Service Records, RG 79, NACP. See Hosmer, Preservation Comes of Age, 607-10 regarding Crowninshield’s response to Rodnick’s work.
wrote to Hough in 1937 inquiring after Charles Hoppin, wondering “have you ever heard of him or his papers?”

Most importantly, the example set by Crowninshield’s leadership inspired the WNMA to reconsider and reconstitute its own relationship with the NPS. The WNMA found itself teetering on the edge of obsolescence during and, in part, as a result of World War II. Though once a powerful organization with national membership, completion of the Association’s primary goal—construction of the Memorial House—left it with little else to do once the NPS assumed control of the Park. Rust’s death and subsequent criticism of the Memorial House’s authenticity further crippled the organization and, between 1932 and 1935, the WNMA atrophied to little more than a handful of Northern Neck ladies. Construction and operation of the Log House buoyed the group for several years. But the Log House’s failure during the war years sounded the death knell for an organization unsure of its own purpose at a time when authenticity was quickly replacing charm as the standard *de rigueur* for historic preservationists.

Just before the war, in a last-ditch attempt to generate revenue to bolster the Log House, the WNMA had begun a small cutting garden from which it sold flowers and herbs to visitors impressed by the Park’s Colonial Garden (figure 19). Following the war, and facing significant financial shortfalls without the Log House, Crowninshield sought to expand the cutting garden by purchasing a greenhouse for the birthplace. She did not, however, clear the idea with Superintendent Hough. When Hough received

---

57 Crowninshield to Hough, 12 July 1937, Ancient Box 6, GEWA. Hough responded by cautioning Crowninshield against taking Hoppin too seriously. He called Hoppin’s offers of assistance “almost too good” and referred to him as “a commercial gentleman...in all the work he has done for this place there is always that haunting lurking inference that for more money he will tell more.” Hough concluded with another warning: “In person he is apparently stone deaf, but some have told me that he actually hears very well.” See Hough to Crowninshield, 25 January 1938, in Ibid.

58 NPS Records 14/25, GEWA includes a 1940 schedule of rates proposed for sale of surplus plant materials including a variety of seeds, cuttings, roots, bulbs, seedlings, herbs, and trees.
notice from the Greenhouse company that their new model was on its way, he exploded. Who would erect and maintain the greenhouse? The Park certainly could not spare any employees. How would the WNMA use the money it earned from the greenhouse—did its enabling legislation allow them the right to earn income at a Federal park? And most importantly, in the uncertain archeological climate of those post-Building X days, where would they put the greenhouse? The NPS was none too willing to run the risk of damaging any other as yet discovered foundations, even with a building as insubstantial as a greenhouse.59

But Crowninshield bypassed Hough entirely and, by September 1951, received authority from the NPS regional office to erect her greenhouse atop the cutting garden. The Association used its own funds to erect the building and, despite a chronically faulty heating system, the greenhouse was up and running by early 1952 (figure 20).60 And although her methods were questionable, nobody doubted the success of Crowninshield’s idea, not even Hough. The superintendent admitted that “there is no question but that a brisk business in living plants...can be developed here.” He still had good reason to worry about staffing concerns. Although the WNMA paid the Park’s gardener overtime to help with its operation, the responsibilities were too great for one worker and the Park’s landscape suffered accordingly. Moreover, the WNMA continued to reinvest its profits back into the garden rather than assist with Park upkeep and development.61

Hough chaffed at this perceived wrong and appealed directly to the regional director for a...

---

59 Hough to Regional Director, 7 August 1951, NPS Records 9/25, GEWA. Also see SMR, August 1951.
60 See Regional Director to Hough, 8 August 1951, NPS Records 9/25, GEWA; and SMR, September 1951, November 1951, February 1952, and September 1952.
61 SMR, September and October 1952.
legal decision in the matter. Crowninshield’s good intentions for the WNMA clearly surpassed what Hough considered the limits of her authority at Wakefield.

Hough’s desired legal decision was not long in coming. Regional Chief of Concessions E.V. Buschman had visited Wakefield just as the WNMA was erecting its greenhouse. He observed that, in addition to plants sold through the new garden project, the WNMA also derived income from the sale of books, pamphlets, souvenirs, and snacks. If the NPS was going to maintain any control over the WNMA’s commercial activity at Wakefield, Buschman argued, the Association would have to consolidate all its commercial activities under one concession permit. Until that point, the idea would have been ludicrous. Historically, the WNMA had operated with relative impunity at the birthplace. After all, they had created the birthplace and, more importantly, had largely managed its commemorative buildings and their contents. A concession permit would render it vulnerable to the bureaucratic limitations faced by any independent contractor looking to do business with the NPS. Needless to say, the WNMA balked at the prospect, citing their “authority direct from Congress to build, operate and maintain the Memorial House here.”

Buschman’s proposal struck an especially dissonant chord with WNMA members still perturbed by what they considered their unjust eviction from the Log House. Still, the Association’s membership had thinned over time. And, ironically, Crowninshield’s intensive furnishing campaign with its emphasis on authenticity had left little for the WNMA’s local members to do. She had obtained all the furnishings, created careful instructions for their placement and care, and left nobody with her credentials in charge.

---

62 Hough to Regional Director, 20 April 1953, NPS Records 9/25, GEWA.
63 SMR, January 1952.
As far as the NPS was concerned, the Memorial House was perfect the way it was and, having benefited from the windfall of Crowninshield’s involvement, was not likely to let an unprofessional ladies association meddle with expensive historic furnishings. Thus disempowered, the WNMA found itself unable to resist the NPS and, in August 1952, it signed its first concession permit.\textsuperscript{64} The impact was immediate. WNMA members stopped volunteering as Memorial House docents and the Association purchased an alarm system instead.\textsuperscript{65} They looked elsewhere for commemorative projects as in 1953 when the WNMA funded a garden party and travel brochure for the Virginia Travel Council.\textsuperscript{66}

To make matters worse, the Association’s powerful and, by the early 1950s, nationally known leader stepped down. Crowninshield resigned her presidency in 1956 and passed away only two years later.\textsuperscript{67} Hough’s replacement, Superintendent Russell Gibbs, commented coolly that “this may have some effect on the operation or continuance of the WNMA.” The WNMA seemed once again poised on the edge of organizational oblivion.\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{64} SMR, April and August 1952.
\textsuperscript{65} Petty theft was a problem at the Memorial House. A fork and several pewter spoons vanished in 1948. Additional tableware turned up missing later that year. Beginning in May 1949, the WNMA resolved to “employ one of its members to be at the memorial building... for three months every day, to help protect the numerous antique furnishing items they have donated to the government, and which with our skeleton force we are unable to properly protect.” Hough loved the idea and over time it seemed to work. Reports indicate, however, that this initiative ended in 1952 and an alarm system—through chronically unreliable—was installed by 1954. See SMR, June 1948, October 1948, May 1949, July 1949, April 1952, and December 1954.
\textsuperscript{66} SMR, April 1953.
\textsuperscript{67} SMR, May 1955 and 1956.
\textsuperscript{68} SMR, July 1958. This is not to say that the WNMA entirely withdrew from the Birthplace, but the nature of its participation changed dramatically. Annual meetings, once held in the Log House, now took place in the superintendent’s office thus implying subservience to the NPS. The WNMA devoted the majority of its resources to the greenhouse and cutting garden through small improvements including the addition of lattice sun shades in June 1955 and the construction of display shelves in 1957. The WNMA also continued its tradition of serving spiced cider and gingerbread in colonial costume to visitors on George Washington’s birthday between 1955 and 1960. SMR, June 1955, October 1956, May 1957, July 1957, August 1957, and June 1958. Every February SMR mentions Washington birthday events.
Talk of disbandment circulated during the WNMA's 1958 annual meeting. Superintendent Gibbs advised the group on how they might liquefy their assets so as to directly benefit the Park. Association members considered their legal options. But, by the following year's annual meeting, something had changed. In 1959, conversation turned from disbanding to building membership. It is not clear exactly what precipitated this dramatic shift, although renewed concerns regarding the status of the Log House were likely responsible. Hough's successor, Russell Gibbs, had designs on the building ever since his arrival in 1953. In 1954, Gibbs suggested that the Park convert the Log House into residential quarters for Park staff. Nobody, however, could figure out exactly who owned the Log House. Institutional memory had faded with the deaths of Hough and Crowninshield and staffing shortages rendered Park records incomplete and disorganized. By 1957, however, Gibbs had obtained ample evidence to support his claims to the Log House and had taken steps to convert the building into staff quarters.

That nobody among the WNMA's ranks resisted Gibbs' plans speaks volumes about the sad state of Association affairs during the late 1950s. Crowninshield's death in the summer of 1958 surely worsened the situation and so it is no surprise that talk of disbandment rippled through the annual meeting that October. But Crowninshield's example of aggressive leadership, demonstrated in her handling of the greenhouse, evidently made an impression. Not long after the National Trust for Historic Preservation named an award for the WNMA's late president, the organization found within itself a

---

69 Gibbs to Mrs. James Jesse, 28 October 1958, NPS Records 6/25, GEWA. Also see SMR, October 1958.
70 SMR, April 1959.
71 Gibbs to Regional Director, 4 June 1954, NPS Records 6/25, GEWA.
72 SMR, April 1957.
new spirit of activism. Talk turned toward building membership and, at its 1960 annual meeting, the WNMA elected a new kind of president: Janie Mason.

It had been nearly twenty years since Mason resigned her position as operator of the Log House and now, with Hough gone and the Log House again in jeopardy, she returned with a vengeance. In early 1962, Mason wrote directly to Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall demanding that “the ladies of the Wakefield Memorial Association would like to have their legal status determined by the National Park Service, as to the furniture purchased by the WNMA and placed in the Log House when the Log House was in operation as a ‘Tea Room.” Udall refused, arguing that the WNMA had turned over all of their property to the NPS in 1932. Mason disagreed and countered that the Log House had not yet been equipped or furnished in 1932 and that its contents thus remained the property of the WNMA. The Regional Office asked Gibbs to look into the situation by examining the WNMA’s records which had supposedly been turned over to the NPS when the Association had become a concessionaire in 1952. But, as Gibbs soon discovered, the Association never did turn over its records. Rather, what he found was a smattering of loose documents “covering many years...stored in numerous cardboard boxes on a member’s back porch. They are not being made available to us for examination.”

73 Hardinge Scholle (Properties Officer of National Trust for Historical Preservation) to Gibbs, 2 October 1958, NPS Records 6/25, GEWA.
74 In addition to Mason, the 1960 elections brought to power an entire coterie of local women. Mrs. Neale Sanders won the vice presidency along with Mrs. J.R. Carver as second vice President and Mrs. E.T. Ames as third vice president. Mrs. James Latane became the Association’s secretary and Mrs. Margaret Lowery assumed the duties of treasurer. Thus staffed, the WNMA emerged as something of a community action group. Moreover, the group decided to maintain its select local membership and amended its by-laws in such a way as to allow membership by invitation only. SMR, April 1960.
75 Mason to Udall, 30 January 1962, NPS Records 17/25, GEWA. Gibbs to Regional Director, 7 August 1962, NPS Records 10/25, GEWA.
76 Gibbs to Regional Director, 17 April 1962, NPS Records 10/25, GEWA. Also see SMR, April 1962.
And so began a pitched battle between two organizations equally determined to maintain their authority at Washington's birthplace. The NPS attempted to pacify the WNMA by offering to rewrite its concession permit in a manner reflecting the Association's "excellent record of assistance to the National Park Service." But Mason would not succumb without a battle. She objected to the permit's requirement that the Association surrender its records to the NPS, arguing that "that is no business of the government" and that "This gives too much power to the Superintendent." Moreover, Mason demanded that prior to approval, "each and every clause...be explained by the regional director...and compared with the old permit." 77 Twenty years before any of this happened, Mason had quietly resigned her position at the Log House rather than engage Superintendent Hough in a prolonged battle. And during those years, the Wakefield ladies had always relied upon Crowninshield, a wealthy powerful metropolitan woman, to be their spokesmen. Now, perhaps inspired by Crowninshield's strong leadership, Mason refused to relent in her dogged defense of an old way of remembering. To protect the Association's ever tenuous claim to authority at Washington's birthplace, Mason was unafraid to challenge the NPS and even willing to demand parity at the bargaining table.

But she could only keep up the Log House fight so long as the WNMA retained power over its last remaining symbolic relics: the Log House furnishings. Though charming, Crowninshield's iconic relics had shifted the Memorial House into a very different commemorative frame than imagined by Josephine Rust and the early Association. The building no longer explicitly honored, as it had, the Association's hand in remembering Washington. And with fewer opportunities to exert their own control over the house's furnishings, the Wakefield ladies sought other opportunities to deploy

77 Gibbs to Regional Director, 3 July 1962, NPS Records 10/25, GEWA.
symbolic objects in meaningful ways. To that end, the Log House Tea Room—which had, recall, been built in memory of Josephine Rust—provided a stage of sorts on which the Association could perform proper domesticity in a way unmitigated by the NPS’s interest in historical authenticity. Yes, the Log House was a complete financial failure, but it had created a safe haven for the Association’s symbolic sensibility. So, even if the Wakefield ladies could not decorate the Memorial House as they so desired, they could don colonial costumes and serve tea at their monthly meetings in the Log House.

It was exactly that last remnant of old-order commemoration that Mason fought so hard to protect until December 1962 when Acting Regional Director Raymond Mulvany wrote directly to Mason explaining that the NPS had, in fact, confirmed its possession of the Log House furnishings. The Wakefield ladies realized that resistance was futile and soon thereafter agreed to accept the proposed changes to their concession permit. But Mason continued to fight. She denied receiving various NPS correspondence and denied the credibility of what she did receive. In April 1963, Mason promised to pick through all the WNMA’s remaining records to settle the debate. She even threatened that her attorney son, George Mason Jr., would intervene on her behalf. The battle had ended, though, and when the NPS finally obtained the WNMA’s records in 1964, regional auditor C.C. Thomas determined that a significant portion was missing. Almost coincidentally, the WNMA voted against hosting the Park’s annual celebration of Washington’s birthday. It would have been the first lapse since 1932 had

78 See Mulvany to Mason, 19 December 1962; and Assistant Solicitor Bernard Meyer to Director, 27 November 1962, HFC.
79 For a summary of Thomas’s observations regarding the WNMA’s incomplete records, see Gibbs to Regional Director, 22 April 1963, NPS Records 10/25, GEWA; and various correspondence in NPS Records 10/25, GEWA. Also see SMR, December 1962, October 1963, and January 1964.
the superintendent’s wife not taken on the responsibility. But, birthday or no birthday, Mason’s aggressive—though failed—effort to reestablish the Association’s authority at Wakefield demonstrated that the power of symbolic relics had largely yielded to iconicity’s singular claim to authority at Washington’s birthplace by the early 1960s.

**Indexicality and the Stamp of Authenticity**

For over twenty years a variety of leaders and relics—both old and new—clamored for authority at Washington’s birthplace. At the center of it all stood Superintendent Hough. Amid the demands of a wartime economy, crippling understaffing, and constant attacks on the legitimacy of his park, Hough mediated the WNMA’s relationship with the NPS and sought for himself a comfortable space in between. But the demands of constant diplomacy took their toll. In early 1950, W.H. Crock Ford published an expose on Hough and the birthplace in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. “The Historic Case of...The Misunderstood Marker” depicts a burdened superintendent who, though having turned down three opportunities for reassignment during his tenure at Popes Creek, struggled to maintain his optimism. The article embarrassed Hough. He thought Ford’s portrayal presented him as entirely too unprofessional. Hough apologized to the Director for “the references to the shrug of my shoulders; the gleam in my eye; and the resolute front,” references Hough found “particularly distasteful.”

But Hough did have good reason for disappointment by the end of the 1940s. Ever since he arrived at Wakefield, the superintendent sought two major improvements...

---

80 SMR, February 1964. Also see Minutes of the WNMA, 6 October 1966, NPS Records 16/25, GEWA.  
82 Hough to Director, 21 February 1950, NPS Records 7/25, GEWA.
for the Monument: an administrative building and a museum. By 1940, Hough had won a qualified victory in his battle for an administrative building. After years of unsuccessfully lobbying the agency, Hough proposed a temporary administration building that garnered Agency favor by avoiding any substantial excavation that might damage as-yet discovered archeological resources. Victory on one front, however, spelled defeat on the other and Hough wrote to Crowninshield in late 1940 explaining that additional appropriations for a museum were unlikely given the success of his administrative building proposal. 83

It was a difficult compromise for Hough to swallow. Since 1932 he had been collecting archeological odds and ends—faunal and man-made—found scattered about the Birthplace. The collection grew quickly and Hough assembled a makeshift display of shark’s teeth, fossils, and Native American artifacts in the Memorial House’s unfurnished summer kitchen. But Hough’s collection demanded more space. 84 He successfully petitioned the NPS for permission to devise a formal museum plan and the Agency sent curator J. Paul Hudson to help with the work. Hudson cleaned, classified, and numbered Hough’s artifacts and set to drafting a display plan in 1936. 85 Two years later, Hough approved Hudson’s final report and recommended it to the Director. “An Historical Museum for George Washington Birthplace National monument, Prospectus and

83 Hough to Crowninshield, 18 December 1940, NPS Records 19/25, GEWA.
84 SMR, October 1932, NPS Records, GEWA. Hough acquired a number of display cases donated by Colonial National Monument in 1935, but space remained a problem. He reported, “through a cooperative gesture by the Colonial National Monument, this monument will have several relic storage cases made at Yorktown by CCC men. At present our storage facilities are inadequate and we are in real need of proper means to keep our ever increasing quantity of relics.” SMR, May 1935, NPS Records, GEWA.
85 SMR, October and December 1936, NPS Records, GEWA.
Tentative Exhibit Plan” calls for wall displays, artifact cases, and a series of dioramas all arranged throughout one substantial, free-standing museum building. 86

Agency reviewers hated it. Assistant Historian Charles Porter criticized Hudson for giving Native American history undue emphasis. He additionally argued that the proposed museum plan failed to explain the Building X controversy as one rooted in the distant, pre-NPS past. 87 Regional Director Tillotson similarly dismissed the plan, agreeing that it “will undoubtedly have to undergo reconsideration and revision.” 88 With the revision process underway, Hough appealed to Crowninshield for help. She encouraged the WNMA to petition Secretary Ickes and, in time, the Association agreed to subsidize a portion of the proposed building costs. 89 In late 1940, following Agency approval of Hudson’s plan, the WNMA made it known that they might be willing to buy materials for a museum building if the CCC provided labor for its construction. 90 Director Drury suggested to Crowninshield that $2,500 would cover the cost of a CCC-built museum, but others in the NPS disagreed with his estimates and further cautioned him against bargaining with the WNMA. 91

87 Porter’s criticism is harsh. See his “Technical Review,” Branch of Historic Sites, 28 June 1938, National Park Service Records, RG 79, NACP.
88 Tillotson to Hough, 19 May 1940, National Park Service Records, RG 79, NACP. Also see Ralph Lewis’s 26 August 1939 memo including comments from regional technicians in Records of the National Park Service NE Region, RG 79, NAMAR.
89 Minutes of the WNMA, 25 April 1938, NPS Records, Unprocessed Material 18/37, GEWA.
90 Tolson to Drury, 28 November 1940, National Park Service Records, RG 79, NACP
91 Drury to Crowninshield, 3 December 1940, National Park Service Records, RG 79, NACP. For examples of opposition to Drury, see Ludgate to Regional Director, 16 December 1940, National Park Service Records, RG 79, NACP; Acting Supervisor of Research and Interpretation Ned Burns to Regional Director, 20 December 1940, National Park Service Records, RG 79, NACP; and Acting Regional Director Fred Johnston to Director, 18 December 1940, National Park Service Records, RG 79, NACP. Chief of planning Thomas Vint summarized the situation in a 1941 memo:
The WNMA’s interest in funding the museum should not be understood as an endorsement of Hough’s plan. Rather, the WNMA was eager to evict Hough and his collection from a building he had unrightfully occupied for nearly a decade. This explains why Crowninshield had supported Hough’s building plans all along. Hough himself admitted that the WNMA had been “desirous for years now to furnish the structure in accordance with the purpose for which they built it; but the park service has never provided space for the administration of the monument and we commandeered the kitchen for this foreign purpose immediately after its completion.\footnote{SMR, December 1939, NPS Records, GEWA.}

So, when Hough won permission to erect a temporary administration building, the WNMA moved quickly to reclaim their Colonial Kitchen. In the meantime, it had become evident that an entire museum building was out of the question. Therefore, during an Association meeting in 1940, Crowninshield urged members to allocate funds to prepare the Memorial House basement to receive Hough’s objects. The Association agreed and allocated five hundred dollars for the project.\footnote{Minutes of the WNMA, 26 April 1940, WNMA Records, Unprocessed Material 18/37, GEWA. Also see Hough to Regional Director, 18 May 1940, National Park Service Records, RG 79, NACP.}

Committed more to the protection of his objects than to his increasingly tenuous hopes for a museum building, Hough accepted the WNMA’s donation and petitioned the NPS once again, this time for permission to make the Memorial House basement accessible to the public. And, once again, Hough’s plans collapsed. The basement,
according to agency planners, was simply too hazardous for safe use by visitors. Hough packed up his objects in protest and hid them away from the public, assuming that such a drastic action would compel agency planners to come up with some way of making valuable historical resources available to everyone (figure 21). But Hough overestimated the Agency’s commitment to indexical relics. When it became evident that his objects would remain indefinitely sealed off in the Memorial House basement, Hough expressed his dismay: “The relic materials discovered here are what place the stamp of authenticity on the place more than any other factor and should not remain hidden from the people.”

Hough’s description of Monument artifacts as “the stamp of authenticity on the place” is significant and represents more than just a passing comment. In fact, this sentiment repeated throughout Hough’s reports as in 1941 when he wrote: “Our cases of relics formerly on display in the kitchen building we find are missed even more than we had anticipated. To many visitors these excavated relics are the most convincing things we have to offer, and unquestionably established the authenticity of the place.” That Hough was so concerned about establishing the “authenticity of the place” speaks volumes about the impact of the Memorial House and its surrounding controversies on interpretation at the Park. Hough believed dearly that if the Monument was to retain credibility as a legitimate historical site, it would have to offer more than the Memorial House. He never surrendered his hopes for a museum and allowed Paul Hudson to

---

94 “Plans were finally prepared covering the proposed changes to the mansion and kitchen buildings, but due to the impossibility of adapting the basement steps of the mansion to the new usage the undersigned has requested that the display cases be moved to the basement and not be given general public access. By thus closing the temporary museum it is hoped that some sort of action, omitting the alteration of the steps, can be had and the work prosecuted.” SMR, July 1940, NPS Records, GEWA.
95 SMR, October 1940, NPS Records, GEWA.
96 SMR, January 1941, NPS Records, GEWA.
continue his work in the basement of the Memorial House—in the event that a better space might be found—despite NPS orders.97

But Hough’s struggle to place the stamp of authenticity on Washington’s birthplace with his collection of indexical relics had long been doomed by the NPS’s ever increasing faith in the power of iconicity. Years before Hough and Hudson had even formulated their museum plan, Director Cammerer remarked to Charles Moore that “the trinkets that Mr. Hough had in the kitchen have been taken out and it has now been furnished as a kitchen, which, of course, is much more interesting.”98 Louise Crowninshield’s mastery of charming authentic resemblance—iconicity par excellence—trumped Hough’s “trinkets” at every turn and, with Hough’s death and the collapse of Janie Mason’s Log House campaign, the NPS prepared to push its Monument into new frontiers of historical iconicity.

97 SMR, November 1952.
98 Cammerer to Moore, 25 November 1940, Commission of Fine Arts, Project Files, RG 66, NAB.
CHAPTER V
FRAMING THE COLONIAL PICTURE

Superintendent Russell Gibbs and his staff had a rough go of it during the spring and early summer of 1959. The Potomac River Oysters Wars—an ongoing and very violent turf war between Maryland and Virginia oyster tongers dating all the way back to Washington’s day—erupted anew in April and a park neighbor was killed in the crossfire.\(^1\) Less dramatic, though equally troubling were the demands placed on park resources in May and June as visitors crowded the Monument’s Potomac River beachfront and filled its picnic area beyond capacity. On one occasion, vandals flooded the picnic area by disconnecting a drinking fountain. Gibbs erected traffic barriers that June and hoped to avoid recurrent problems by denying visitors access to recreational areas during evening hours. Labor shortages also plagued the superintendent throughout the summer and murmurings in WNMA circles about membership expansion surely raised Gibbs’s curiosity.\(^2\)

\(^1\) In 1947, the Maryland legislature dissolved the Mount Vernon Pact of 1786 which had established fishing rights along the Maryland and Virginia border. Full access to the Potomac River including those portions previously controlled by Virginia thus fell to Maryland and triggered years of conflict between oyster tongers and commercial anglers. During the 1950s, it was not uncommon to see Maryland oyster patrollers with deck-mounted machine guns in search of Virginian oyster pirates. See John Wennersten, *The Oyster Wars of Chesapeake Bay* (Centreville, MD: Tidewater Publishers, 1981).

\(^2\) SMR, April-August 1959.
All of these concerns suggest something of the changing times at Washington’s birthplace during the 1950s. Though unquestionably rural and clearly embedded within the historical exigencies of its political and geographic landscape, Washington’s birthplace had also become a modern tourist destination and, as such, host to throngs of newly mobile Americans. A generation of returning veterans with young families and newly disposable incomes increasingly devoted its leisure time to exploring the nation’s brand new interstate highway system during the late 1940s and 50s (figure 22). Historic sites—including national parks that offered affordable vacation destinations to working and middle-class families—experienced unprecedented visitation figures in turn. And those visitors came with a new sense of history indelibly marked, during the 1950s, by the proliferation of television and fears of Communism. Cowboys and Indians had become fixtures on the TV screen and even Davy Crockett reminded viewers about America’s frontier spirit and its manifest destiny. The frontier trope found renewed expression in the country’s space race with the Soviet Union. Disney Land’s juxtaposition of Frontierland and Tomorrowland—the epitome of the American tourist experience during the 1960s—speaks to the capacity of Cold War era Americans to understand the past and the future as two sides of the same nationalistic coin.  

Accordingly, Cold War public historians struggled to fashion a usable past deployable in the battle against perceived threats to American democracy.

Preservationists fought to protect historic buildings from the postwar construction boom

---

by issuing their own “containment strategies.” Historic preservation, they argued, is one way of deploying the legacy of American history against those forces that threaten to destroy it. To that end, American museums dedicated their resources to the battle against Communism. Colonial Williamsburg’s Kenneth Chorley, for example, employed explicitly Cold War rhetoric when he proposed a “Truman Doctrine” for American history museums, suggesting that an investment in American museums equaled an investment in the fight against Communism. In other regards, museums sometimes failed to promote what the Federal government wanted its Communist rivals to see as a strong democratic nation free of racial difference and social discord. Although Washington’s birthplace certainly understood itself as a defender of American values, we will see that deep-rooted prejudice—and the persistence of a particularly nasty sort of object fetishism—undercut any hopes for stemming racial discord at Popes Creek.

Despite the radical changes underway at Washington’s birthplace during the 1950s, it is the voice of an older generation of park visitor that rings clearest from the cacophony of comments and complaints registered during those years. Mrs. C.C. Warfield visited the Monument on August 13, 1959 and did not at all approve of what she discovered there. Although she had not visited the Park in twenty-eight years, Warfield—who claimed to have been involved with the early WNMA—wasted no time in expressing her concern for what she considered the NPS’s mismanagement of the Association’s Memorial House. She disparaged the building’s interior paint scheme. The wooden floors, Warfield argued, were not properly oiled. And why ever, she wondered, did the NPS furnish the Memorial House with such shabby decorations? Warfield took particular issue with a seventeenth-century rug on display in the parlor; she

---

4 West, Domesticating History, 135.
probably wondered what happened to the far more impressive bearskin rug. Warfield additionally lambasted her tour guide, Ranger Fred Griffith, for suggesting that the Memorial House was not an exact reproduction of Washington’s birth home. She speculated about his probable ties to Moscow and suggested to another staff member that Griffith was likely “TV brain washed.”

Gibbs and his staff dismissed Warfield’s complaints. They doubted her alleged affiliation with the WNMA and brushed aside her comments as nothing more than the paranoid ravings of a confused old lady. But, if we take Warfield on her word and accept that she had been involved with or at least sympathetic with the mission of the WNMA during its early years, then her outrage should come as no surprise. When Warfield last visited the Park, in 1931, the Memorial House had only just been completed, the WNMA had only just transferred its property to the NPS, and even Superintendent Hough had not arrived yet. It was a time when symbolic relics reigned supreme at Washington’s birthplace and memories of Custis’s first stone breathed vigor into the ranks of a ladies association firmly convinced of its own patriotic imperative and the power of objects. Who at the Park in 1959 save Warfield, and possibly Janie Mason and her friends, remembered any of this? Hough was dead; Rust was dead; even Crowninshield had passed away. All that remained of the Park’s institutional memory remained hidden away in dusty boxes full of superintendent’s reports. When Warfield returned to Washington’s birthplace, she discovered a commemorative world turned upside down and unaware of its own past.

---

5 Gibbs to Regional Director, 31 August 1959, NPS Records 10/25, GEWA. Also see SMR, August 1959 for a brief account. Warfield’s association with the WNMA is unclear. Gibbs searched for her name in the Association’s so-called Golden Book—a list of contributors and members—without luck. She very well could have belonged to the hundreds of out-of-state supporters enlisted by Josephine Rust during the late 1920s.
The NPS stood to benefit from some degree of institutional amnesia. Its credibility had, after all, come into question following the Rodnick Report, which attacked the Memorial House’s historical legitimacy. As we witnessed in the previous chapter, the Agency’s reluctance to sponsor Hough’s museum of indexical relics—his beloved arrowheads, shark’s teeth, and other archeological curiosities—demonstrates at least in part a desire to distance itself from the controversies over interpretation of the late 1930s and 1940s. And, in fact, it appears that the Cold War years introduced an entirely new set of social, cultural, and political concerns that displaced old debates about authenticity as Americans headed to the highways in search of a usable past. For these reasons, and with the possible exception of Janie Mason’s campaign to reassert the WNMA’s presence at Wakefield, Superintendent Gibbs’ never had to wrangle with the public relations debacle that plagued Hough following the discovery of Building X.

But, had Gibbs recognized the extent of Warfield’s concern, he would have understood that neither Crowninshield’s furnishings nor his own presence was enough to wipe the slate clean. Perhaps Warfield was simply a victim of Cold War paranoia when she accused Ranger Griffith of Communist sympathies. Even so, it is significant that the only language Warfield could find to express her outrage was the rhetoric of communist conspiracy, a familiar and terrifying refrain in a country recently witness to the onslaught of runaway McCarthyism. And what did she mean by “TV brain washed?” What was it about television that Warfield considered detrimental to appropriately commemorating the birth of George Washington? Both aspects of Warfield’s complaint, I think, demonstrate that, to her, the NPS’s failure to protect the Memorial House’s regime of symbolic meaning equaled a failure to preserve patriotic values—a failure to protect
George Washington and the memory of those who birthed him. To Warfield, the Memorial House had gone from a dollhouse to depthless stage set. Its new objects, lacking proper connotative meaning, lay open to the masses, free to be populated by whatever meaning the tourist desired—clearly the work of Communist conspirators!

This episode demonstrates that, although much had changed at Washington’s birthplace, iconicity had yet to fill the abyss of meaning whose epicenter remained the backfilled foundations of Building X. Although Crowninshield largely succeeded in redefining the standards of credibility and authenticity at the Monument, her substitution of iconic furnishings for an older regime of symbolic and indexical relics was not enough to unburden the Memorial House of its considerable commemorative baggage. It was certainly not enough to sway someone like Warfield who looked, though ultimately in vain, to the birthplace to reaffirm her own sense of the proper order of things. In fact, Crowninshield’s refurnishing of the Memorial House brought the building under even closer scrutiny and, if anything probably would have raised additional questions and concerns about authenticity had the Park not undergone a veritable interpretive sea change during the 1960s. For a host of reasons that we will explore in the present chapter, Washington’s birthplace experienced radical changes during the 1960s characterized by a wholesale investment in what today we commonly call “living history.” Although living history worked toward stripping the Memorial House of its interpretive death grip at Popes Creek, it did so only by tearing new interpretive lesions in the Monument’s delicate mnemonic fabric.

A Visit to Washington’s Birthplace, Circa 1950
I will discuss that change, but in order to fully appreciate it, let us first visit the birthplace as it would have appeared to visitors before the advent of high-order living history. My account of goings on at Washington’s birthplace has, to this point, primarily considered the motivations and actions of those individuals responsible for commemorating George Washington. But what about the people who visited the birthplace? If we are to glean any sense of the massive interpretive changes that unfolded at Popes Creek during the 1960s, we must first have some idea of how visitors experienced the Monument before those changes. Recovering visitor experience, however, is a tricky business. Unsolicited comments and criticisms like the complaints logged by Mrs. C.C. Warfield only reveal part of the story. They do not always help us understand how visitors moved through the Park. Nor do they always reveal how Park Rangers interpreted the site’s various buildings and artifacts. “Interpretation,” as used by the NPS, refers to “the educational methods by which the history and meaning of historic sites...are explained.”6 Museums, not unlike grocery or department stores, silently though purposefully guide visitors through their displays with myriad signage and other interpretive devices. The rhythm and sequence of any given tour reveals interpretive intent but, again, how can we know how visitors moved through the monument over forty years ago?

Fortunately, though perhaps not surprisingly, we can rely on Superintendent Phillip Hough to be our tour guide. For over a decade and probably longer, Hough worked diligently to craft a comprehensive guide for visitors to Washington’s birthplace. The Park’s archive contains several drafts of this document edited and re-edited by

---


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Hough over the years until approximating something of a final product in 1951, what Hough titled “Material for a 56-Page Historic Handbook on George Washington Birthplace National Monument.” Hough’s handbook includes a history of the life of George Washington with ample reference to his genealogy and familial roots in Virginia’s Northern Neck. It also chronicles efforts to mark and commemorate the site of Washington’s birth. But most importantly for our purposes, Hough’s handbook includes a narrative description of the Monument, a sort of early self-guided tour penned by the superintendent himself. Over the years and throughout the genesis of Hough’s handbook, editorial changes to the tour reflect real changes in the Park’s landscape and correspond with Hough’s sense for the physical and, consequently, interpretive logic of the place. The handbook, because written by a man who personally guided thousands of visitors through the birthplace for over two decades, cannot help but approximate in relief the path followed by those visitors.

It only takes a few small imaginative leaps for us to recover from Hough’s handbook some sense of the overall visitor experience at Washington’s birthplace on any given spring or summer day during its first two decades. That experience began even before visitors entered the Monument. Then, as today, visitors approaching the Park by car from the southwest along Route 204 would have seen the old government monument looming far off in the distance (figures 23 & 24). The fifty-foot tall granite obelisk, relocated from the supposed site of Washington’s birth in 1931 to the Monument’s entrance, recalled on a smaller scale the shape and form of Washington’s better known monument fifty miles north in Washington, D.C. Although the obelisk may have set a

7 Unless otherwise noted, the following description is based on Philip Hough, “Material for a 56-Page Historic Handbook on George Washington Birthplace National Monument,” submitted to the Regional Director, 11 January 1951, NPS Records 6/25, GEWA.
particularly formal commemorative tone, visitors steered around it, following the Park’s
tree-lined access road another few hundred yards passed Hough’s one-room office
building into a parking lot beyond which stood a very different kind of monument.

On busy days, visitors found their own way from the Parking lot to the Memorial
House. But, when possible, Hough greeted visitors in the Parking lot and personally led
them north along a “plain earth driveway” purposefully unpaved to resemble an
eighteenth-century wagon path (figure 25). The wagon path arced toward the Memorial
House past rose bushes, tufts of winter jasmine, and more importantly, what visitor
pamphlets from the mid 1950s still called the “site of Building X.” It is difficult to know
how, if at all, Hough broached the subject with visitors. It is not clear whether the Park
marked the site in any way, it certainly had not yet outlined the buried foundations with
decorative boxwoods as it would in the 1970s. Rather, all visitors likely saw of Building
X as of 1950 was an unsightly bare spot in an otherwise well-tended lawn.

In all likelihood, Hough probably hurried his guests past Building X to what they,
and he, would have considered the primary attraction at Washington’s birthplace.
Standing before the “land front” of the Memorial House, Hough gestured toward an
imposing hackberry tree known to have been standing in that very spot the day
Washington was born (figure 26). An adjacent cluster of fig bushes—the very bushes
George Washington Parke Custis noticed back in 1815—also constituted a direct link to
the years of young Washington’s early life. These living relics framed the Memorial
House and, as presented by Hough, bequeathed historical legitimacy to the place. Having
set a reverent mood for his guests, Hough handed them over to a Park Ranger waiting at
an information desk just inside the building’s southwest entrance. The superintendent
returned to his office at the foot of the Park’s parking lot where he attended to the day’s business and watched for additional visitors.

The story becomes less clear as we enter the Memorial House. Hough’s handbook does not provide a detailed account of what occurred inside the building and, because furnishings and staff changed so frequently during those early years, there probably was no standard tour per se. A Park Ranger or possibly an Association member—maybe even in costume—would have been on hand to answer questions about Washington, his times, and the objects arranged throughout the house. During the Monument’s first year of operation, visitors were allowed to roam freely through the house and its decorated rooms. By 1932, however, problems with theft prompted the WNMA to install barriers in interior doorways thereby limiting visitor movement to central hallways. At the same time, prior to Crowninshield’s refurnishing project, visitors frequently commented on the “new” appearance of the furniture, especially in the dining and living rooms and complained about visible electrical outlets and switches installed throughout the house. If Mrs. C.C. Warfield’s complaints are any indication, though, Crowninshield’s iconic overhaul made great strides toward eliminating decorative idiosyncrasy during the intervening twenty years.

Hough’s guidebook suggests that visitors satisfied with their time in the Memorial House left that building and walked just a few paces southwest toward and into the Colonial Kitchen. Though built at roughly the same time as the Memorial House, the

---

8 Physically separating visitors from interior displays likely had the unintended effect of emphasizing the value of those displays and their contents. SMR, July 1932.
9 Hough to Director, 28 September 1934, NPS Records 9/25, GEWA. Nobody, however, desired to linger in the Memorial House prior to July 1932. In that month, the Monument installed screens on the Memorial House windows and doors that “while not colonial, were an urgent necessity in as much as flies and mosquitoes had become a great nuisance.” SMR, July 1932.
Colonial Kitchen made no claims to authenticity. The WNMA intended it rather to complement the Memorial House and to provide opportunities to interpret eighteenth-century domestic life. Similar kitchens were standard fare at Colonial Revival events during the end of the previous century (see chapter two). The WNMA took its cues accordingly by outfitting the building with "realistic" colonial cooking paraphernalia and a garret-style attic in which the Association hoped to portray the domestic lives of Washington's servants. Before it could do that, though, the NPS—desperate for office space and staff quarters—took over portions of the Colonial Kitchen during the 1930s, creating what must have been a befuddling interpretive experience for visitors. By 1939, in addition to "a few appropriate cooking utensils...grouped around the hearth," the Colonial Kitchen housed Hough's "temporary museum display of relics"; a clerk's office with "the attendant noises of typewriters, adding machines, and telephone bells"; a modern bathroom; a furnace and photographic laboratory in the basement; and staff quarters in the attic—a space originally intended to depict the lives of slaves!\textsuperscript{10} Although the WNMA eventually reclaimed those spaces, the Colonial Kitchen remained a motley affair well into the 1960s.

Outside the Colonial Kitchen, visitors passed through the Park's Colonial Garden by way of a brick path leading southeast past the Memorial House. That same brick path continued through the garden and exited onto an unpaved path called Burnt House Trail. Burnt House Trail wound through a tall stand of native red cedars and along scenic views of Popes Creek until arriving on the "water front" of the Memorial House. From here, the path led to a three-hundred-foot long footbridge that bore visitors across a marshy inlet to a spit of land called Duck Hall where stood the WNMA's Log House Tea Room.

\textsuperscript{10} Hough to Wilhelm, 10 April 1939, NPS Records 8/25, GEWA.
The Log House’s record of bad business suggests that most visitors returned to their cars rather than cross the footbridge. Having left the parking lot and driven back around the old granite obelisk, visitors might make a final visit to the old Washington family burial ground, about a half mile north of the Park entrance. There, surrounded by attractive landscaping, lay the remains of thirty-one Washington family members. George’s parents, his grandparents, and assorted others remain to this day communally interred within a central stone vault flanked by several commemorative sarcophagi.

Another half mile down the burial ground road, visitors discovered a parking lot abutting the Potomac River and its sandy beaches. Bathers, picnickers, and fossil hunters alike crowded the Park’s Potomac beach on hot summer days. On clear days, one could see the outlines of President James Monroe’s boyhood farmstead across the river. And remnants of a pier built by the War Department in 1896 to land commemorative supplies extended into the river from this site until their removal in 1934. All in all, though, a typical visit to George Washington’s Birthplace National Monument was a short, even hasty affair. Historian Paul Carson argues “that interpretation for the first 36 years of the Park consisted of little more than a peek at museum displays in the kitchen, a walk through the Memorial house, and a quiet stroll to enjoy the beautiful solitude of the area.”

Hough himself estimated in 1952 that most visitors spent just over an hour touring the Monument and devoted only twenty minutes of their visit to the Memorial House.

---

12 The remaining forty minutes included fifteen at the burial ground, another fifteen wandering the grounds, and only five minutes per visit to the Colonial Kitchen, Colonial Garden, and post office. See February 1952 Master Plan Development Outline, NPS Records 8/25, GEWA.
Race, Class, and Conflict at Washington’s Birthplace

Still, a lot can happen in an hour and we must consider the variety of experiences possible during even a short visit. How and what visitors experienced at the Monument largely depended on who they were and, in the years following World War II, visitors to Washington’s birthplace were far more diverse than prior to the war. Hough’s monthly reports support accounts of a postwar American middle-class renaissance. Pre-war reports describe visits by primarily affluent white visitors—what Hough considered “a very high type of visitor...[we] have practically no trouble with the type of parties looking for amusement or excitement.”13 After the war, the situation—and Hough’s understanding of it—changed. In a 1947 report, for example, Hough observed “a considerable difference this year in the kind of people who are going down to Florida...[they] seem to be mostly people of the working class rather than the leisure class as heretofore. Many look like those who are intent on some easy pickings.”14

What Hough meant by “easy pickings” is not entirely clear—he may have been referring to visitors less interested in history than in affordable recreation. The superintendent had always considered it a point of pride that the birthplace attracted “a very high type of visitor,” and took particular umbrage with this newly mobile middle class. Tensions grew particularly high over matters of money. On one hot August day in 1948, for example, Hough attempted to collect an entrance fee from a visitor from Kansas

---

13 SMR, November 1934.
14 SMR, November 1947. Despite his particular chauvinisms, white middle-class Americans did undergo a variety of changes following World War II, especially with regard to the organization and function of family and gender roles. Elaine May’s Homeward Bound ties these changes to the shift in American foreign policy toward Containment. May argues that just as the government sought to protect itself by containing the spread of Communism, American families contained themselves by protecting an isolated private sphere and reinforcing conventional gender roles. This was a very self-conscious process during the postwar years and Hough no doubt struggled to understand why his visitors performed their middle-classness so aggressively.
who responded, "well I’m NOT going to pay you, now what are you going to do about it." Hough did not do anything, but later lamented the exchange and admitted to expecting just that situation to “show up some day.” 15

And, as Hough’s reports reveal, exactly that kind of situation did become more frequent in the postwar years. It is perfectly reasonable to attribute increases in vandalism, trespassing, and irate visitors to dramatic visitation increases throughout the Park system—more visitors necessarily means more disorderly visitors. But new visitors also brought with them new expectations for historic sites. Since the 1950s, as historian Mike Wallace puts it, “Walt Disney has taught people more history, in a more memorable way, than they every learned in school.” 16 American heritage tourists increasingly expected from historic sites a clear, easily digestible, and entertaining story about their past, just like they found in the movie theatre or in front of their own televisions. It is likely that the irate visitor from Kansas simply did not think he got his money’s worth at Washington’s birthplace. After all, for the same investment, why not go to an air-conditioned theatre and forego the interpretive imprecision of the Memorial House and its ominous neighbor, Building X. 17 Regardless, Hough’s not-so-subtle insinuation that working and middle-class visitors were inherently less well behaved than their upper-class predecessors is striking. Two decades of monthly and annual reports reveal that Hough brought to his work very pronounced ideas about class and race that, although probably common throughout the Northern Neck during the 1930s and 1940s,

15 SMR, August 1948.
16 Wallace, Mickey Mouse History, 134.
17 William L. Bird, Jr. chronicles this emergent consumer ethic in “Better Living:” Advertising, Media, and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1935-1955 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999). Of particular interest is the ongoing success and media strategies of the once radio show cum television program, the Cavalcade of America. This program—sponsored by none other than the DuPont Company—deployed a variety of historical themes in the service of American greatness, exactly the sort of media history that increasingly competed with the “real” thing at places like Washington’s birthplace.
nonetheless raise important questions about the NPS's ability—or lack thereof—to accommodate difference in its parks.

In this way, Washington's birthplace failed to support the Federal government's desired presentation of itself as a nation free of social discord. Historian Mary Dudziak demonstrates that, during the Cold War, the United States Federal government worked diligently to combat Communism by cultivating abroad a mythology of American equality, specifically racial equality. In some cases, this strategy translated into Federal support of moderate civil rights reforms including desegregation of the military. Elsewhere, the government undertook aggressive media campaigns. The United States Information Agency published readers like *The Negro in American Life* (1950), for example, that frankly discussed the history of slavery in the United States only to inspire "the reader to marvel at the progress that had been made." At Washington's birthplace, however, visitors witnessed anything but progress toward racial equality.

Park records make scant mention of African American visitors at the birthplace. Those who came were typically local folks looking to fish or swim at the Park's Potomac River beach. But even this limited activity raised questions about how to manage racial intermixing as early as the Monument's first year of operation. NPS Assistant Director Arthur Demaray wrote to Director Albright in 1931 after reviewing a landscape report and noted the "need of another recreational area where colored people can go:"

> When we were at Wakefield this time, we went down to the old wharf on the Potomac River beyond the burial ground and found colored people bathing there. I understand that more and more this area is being utilized by colored people. I think this situation should be frankly met by encouraging the colored people to go

---

to this point and by providing tables and other picnicking facilities for limited use by colored people.  

Although this recommendation came from high within NPS ranks, it is unclear if Demaray's segregationist leanings typified park policy elsewhere. Historical accounts of segregation in NPS parks and Monuments are regrettably few. It appears, though, that the Federal government generally recognized local laws and customs regarding segregation of public facilities. Demaray's comments suggest that the NPS—at least during the 1930s—did in fact manage race relations in accord with Virginia's Jim Crow laws. Moreover, Hough's reports indicate that in 1933 the Monument constructed a "comfort station" behind the residential area "for the use of such colored people as may be working in that section." It therefore appears that Washington's birthplace experimented with segregation and contemporary NPS publications suggest that the Monument was not alone, at least not in Virginia.

But even if the birthplace was not officially segregated, unofficial segregation was very real during the Monument's first decade. Take, for example, the case of Sister M.

---

19 Demaray to Albright, 6 August 1931, NPS Records 9/25, GEWA.
20 For a discussion of Virginia's political climate with regard to race relations and Jim Crow politics, see J. Douglas Smith, Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002). The Monument was among the earliest proving grounds for NPS race policy. Discussions concerning segregated facilities at Shenandoah National Park, for example, did not begin until approximately 1936. See U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places, "Skyline Drive Historic District (Boundary Increase), Shenandoah National Park, Skyland, Lewis Mountain, and Big Meadows," Robinson & Associates, Inc. in association with architrave, c., architects, Washington, D.C., November 4, 2002. Section 8, 57-69 provides an account of the collision between state segregation policy and NPS anti-segregation attitudes especially with regard to the creation and operation of the Lewis Mountain campground and cabin area between 1936 and 1947 in Shenandoah National Park. My thanks to NPS Mid-Atlantic Regional Historian Clifford Tobias for providing these references.
21 SMR, May 1933. It is possible that this comfort station was constructed by the CCC and not the NPS.
22 The October 1938 issue of The Regional Review (1:4) includes a section titled "Negro Recreational Program Gains Momentum" indicating that plans for segregated facilities in Great Smoky Mountains National Park had been approved by the acting secretary of the interior. Also mentioned are preliminary studies for segregated camps and day use area "on federal Recreational Demonstration lands in the West Branch Section twenty miles southwest of Richmond"; an approved master plan including "similar facilities near" Crabtree Creek Recreational Demonstration Area in North Carolina; and a CCC camp in the Shelby County Negro Recreational Area in Memphis, Tennessee.
Dominica. Sister Dominica of Saint Augustine’s Convent visited the birthplace on June 14, 1938 with a group of African-American school children. Although Sister Dominica had visited Popes Creek previously without incident, events took an unfortunate turn on June 14:

I was amazed when we reached the gates yesterday and were told by the superintendent that it was the law that colored people should be segregated from the whites on the picnic grounds. He then jumped into his car and escorted us to the place he claimed that was set aside for colored. It was about a mile from the mansion, and if we had gone much further we should have been in the water. There were no tables or benches such as you would expect to find in a picnic ground or any other conveniences. The superintendent returned later and brought two old and dirty buckets of water for us to drink from, also an old dirty dipper, and trash can. He told us that if we left any trash he could, according to law, compel us to come back and clean it up.

NPS Director Arno Cammerer issued an immediate apology to Sister Dominica and requested an explanation from Hough. The superintendent explained away Sister Dominica’s complaints. He argued that picnicking was not allowed on “Mansion Grounds” and therefore he was compelled to remove the group to Bridges Creek. Hough complained about having to give up “35 minutes of my own lunch time to see that they were provided for” and added that the Log House attendant caught “a colored boy stealing a souvenir lavaliere.”

The Sister Dominica incident was far more, though, than a mere misunderstanding. Hough’s response to Cammerer reveals that institutional racism existed at all levels of park governance. He continued:

All in all, this is the most unpleasant visitation we have had in the seven summer seasons I have been here, —and all that happened was due to the fact that they were segregated for their lunch only. All I can say is that that is the way it’s done

---

23 Although the official NPS report does not specify, it is likely that Dominica belonged to the convent of the Saint Augustine Roman Catholic Church, a historically African-American church in Washington, D.C.
24 Dominica to Cammerer, 15 June 1938, NPS Records 9/25, GEWA.
25 Hough to Cammerer, 16 June 1938, NPS Records 9/25, GEWA.
in Virginia. If I did wrong, I'm sorry, —but then again if I had let them in the regular picnic ground we would no doubt be having complaints from the white visitors. This matter may become a real problem. I would say off-hand that not more than one percent of our visitors are colored, and it does not seem justifiable to maintain a special picnic ground for them, and if we did we would soon be swamped with colored people. That kind of news travels fast.

It is evident from this letter that Hough was not simply a hapless bureaucrat flummoxed by the ambiguous overlap of state and Federal policy regarding segregation. Rather, we see here a superintendent determined to keep black visitors away from Washington's birthplace. A segregated facility, in Hough's mind, would only attract more black visitors because "that kind of news travels fast." As if realizing his own lack of restraint, Hough concluded with a cautious, if clumsy retreat: "we do not ignore colored visitors...but we do not go out of our way to encourage them to come here.” Rather than discipline the superintendent, Cammerer simply urged Hough to establish a separate but equal picnic facility. Consequently, park development plans drawn in 1939 propose a segregated picnic area adjacent to Bridges Creek.

Although records do not indicate that the Monument ever made good on those plans, it is evident that an uncomfortable racial climate persisted at the birthplace long after Hough's tenure. In June 1960, for instance, Monument employee Edward Saunders was arrested and briefly jailed for "bothering a colored school group at the picnic area.” Hough’s replacement, Superintendent Russell Gibbs, accompanied Saunders to court and commented afterward that "there are hopes that this [Saunders’ brief imprisonment] may

tend to subdue these 'mammy cats [sic].’”

That Saunders was allowed to remain on staff at all after this event and that Gibbs was not reprimanded for including such an appalling racial epithet in an official NPS report speaks volumes about attitudes toward racial discrimination at the time. It also reveals the extent to which Federal history at the time—that is, history done and told at National Park Service historic sites—was, in every respect, white history.

“Uncle” Annanias Johnson, Living Relic

The prejudices of the Monument’s staff thus prevented Washington’s birthplace from promoting the Federal government’s desired postwar aesthetic of freedom and unity. Both white and black visitors would have recognized a host of racially coded messages—both official and unofficial—at Washington’s birthplace during its first two decades. Although some of those messages, as we have just seen, were particularly overt, others were more subtle and arguably crafted to imply larger historical meaning about race and the fate of the Old South. It was no secret during the early 1930s that visitors wanted to know about Washington’s slaves. Hough commented in 1934 that visitors often complained about the Monument’s failure to interpret slavery. The superintendent surmised that “our personnel has been asked a thousand times, ‘Where did the slaves stay?’”

To be fair, the WNMA had intended to interpret servitude (it is unclear if the WNMA was willing to take on slavery) in the Colonial Kitchen’s attic, which it had built for that purpose. The NPS, however, appropriated the attic and boarded its own employees there. Amid those hard financial times, Hough undoubtedly heard no end of wisecracks about the slave-like conditions endured by Park staff.

---

27 SMR, June 1960.
28 Hough to Director, 28 September 1934, NPS Records 9/25, GEWA.
But, without the kitchen garret, how else could the Park respond to public demand for a story about slavery? Hough stumbled onto a remarkable solution in late 1932. Although he had only been at the Monument for a short time, Hough understood that the Memorial House and its uneasy relationship with Building X would continue to raise eyebrows as long as the house remained the Monument’s primary interpretive focus. He also noticed that visitors took as much if not more interest in the Monument’s natural landscape—especially its wildlife—than in its commemorative landscape. In order to draw attention away from the house, Hough reasoned, why not cater to the public’s interest and interpret the landscape. Specifically, Hough proposed “an exhibition of colonial crops growing in the fields near the mansion next summer…in which space is provided for one and one half acres of tobacco, one acre of peanuts, five and one half acres of corn and a small cotton patch.”

It was a great idea and remarkably innovative for the day. Hough hoped that locating the crops along the Monument’s primary access road would achieve “maximum museum value.” He anticipated that the corn might eventually feed a yoke of oxen that could be used to demonstrate colonial farming methods and would “add greatly to the colonial picture we intend to create at Wakefield.” Hough even suggested that “twists of Wakefield tobacco”—indexical relics on par with the hackberry tree and fig bushes

---

29 Hough wrote: “while the monument is primarily of historical interest many of the visitors are interested in our wild life, especially the birds. A large percent of the people come from the cities and large towns where due to the rush of things they fail to notice the few birds that adapt themselves to that environment. Here at the birthplace the peace and quiet brings the multitude of songs and notes into prominence and some of the visitors notice for possibly the first time birds that may even be in almost their own dooryards.” See 1932 Annual Wild Life Report [first], George Washington birthplace National Monument, NPS Records 6/25, GEWA. The Monument had acquired three wild turkeys from a state game farm in 1934 and by the following year their number had increased to fourteen. These feathered attractions “proved quite interesting to visitors who have never had an opportunity to see a wild turkey.” See 1934 and 1935 Annual Wildlife Reports, NPS Records 6/25, GEWA.

30 SMR, December 1932.
surrounding the Memorial House—might be sold as souvenirs at the Log House Tea Room. Visitors were fascinated by what was often their first glimpse of peanuts in the rough (figure 27). Hough’s cotton patch, however, raises questions about his intent for the crop demonstration area. Although the Washington family may very well have tended a small cotton patch, it is unlikely that they harvested the short-staple cotton that became the South’s economic lifeblood in the years following Eli Whitney’s invention of the cotton gin. Even so, Hough’s location of his cotton patch close to the Memorial House was likely intended—given what we know of Hough’s racial attitudes—to play on popular ideas about life in the Old South. Visitors unaware of the region’s tobacco history would have inferred from Hough’s cotton patch clear meanings about race, power, and history, especially at a time when what most Americans knew about slavery they likely learned from the film version of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1939) (figure 28).

All that remained was for someone to operate the farm or, more specifically, to tend the tobacco and pick the cotton. Hough certainly could not spare any one from his own staff and managing a small farm definitely exceeded what could be expected of Gardener Harold Broderick. Hough’s monthly reports reveal, however, that the superintendent was willing to hire on extra help as long as that person might serve the dual, though perhaps unwitting, purpose of interpreting slavery. Hough had at his disposal an abandoned house the NPS received with other property from the WNMA in 1931. He secured permission from the NPS to lease the house to anyone willing to manage the farm. Hough looked for a tenant from within the local African-American community. He discovered though that very few people within that community owned
cars and none were willing to live at the remote Monument without easy access to schools, stores, and churches. But, these practical considerations aside, an even more obvious question should have occurred to Hough had he any sense for the realities of black life in Jim Crow Virginia: who in 1937—when memories of legal slavery were still fresh—would willingly work a Virginia tobacco field for the sole purpose of being watched by crowds of white tourists?

Annanias Johnson—Hough called him “Uncle” Annanias—claimed to have been born sometime between 1850 and 1860 on the same plantation that Washington was born on. Johnson claimed to be the last living Wakefield slave. He had spent his entire life at Wakefield and consequently understood tobacco cultivation as well if not better than anyone else in the Northern Neck. It is unclear how the two met, but Hough reported hiring Johnson in March 1933 to manage the new colonial farm exhibit. Despite Johnson’s old age and failing health, Hough considered him an invaluable addition to the Monument, “a darkey of the old school who can never be replaced”:

When he goes, his type will be only a memory in this section. Many is the picture that has been snapped of him by our visitors as he worked in his tobacco patch, and we have had people say that they appreciated him more than anything else we had on the place. This is true of visitors from the deep south especially. Wakefield owes him a living as much as anyone owes anything to anybody. He has worked all of his 82 years on the place and he has often said, “I’ve done sweat on every foot of Wakefield.” Even if he cannot work he is worth a good deal just to have him around for authentic local color and interest.

---

31 SMR, March and October 1933 and March 1934.
32 SMR, March 1942.
Hough valued Johnson’s “authentic local color and interest” so much that, with some assistance from Louise Crowninshield, he paid for the man’s cataract surgery and even bought him a set of false teeth. 33

Hough’s relationship with Johnson is truly startling. The superintendent’s paternalistic urge to provide for and protect “Uncle” Annanias was probably the most authentic relic of the Old South at Washington’s birthplace during the 1930s. Unfortunately, we do not know what Johnson made of any of this. We do know that he worked for Hough for seven years until, in 1940, blindness prevented him from walking daily the five miles to and from work. He passed away seven years later at which time Hough recalled him as “the last of his kind, and there never again will be a man like him at this place.” In the same breath, Hough cursed himself for having not taken a picture of Johnson, “but we are fortunate to have excellent kodachrome movies of the old ex-slave hoeing tobacco at Washington’s birthplace to remember him by.” 34

Hough was right—there never again would be a man like Johnson at Washington’s birthplace. But, then again, Johnson was not really a man in Hough’s eyes. Uncle Annanias was a relic, and an exceptionally valuable one at that. Johnson was the indexical relic that was too good to be true. Far better than the hackberry tree or twists of Wakefield tobacco, Johnson was an actual living, moving body that preserved in its knowledge and memory a direct link to Washington himself. Because Johnson had, as he put it, “sweat on every foot of Wakefield,” he had mingled his own body with the landscape responsible for Washington’s greatness. As an indexical relic, Johnson’s only fault was the impossibility of organizing him along with the other relics in Hough’s

33 Hough to Crowninshield, 4 May 1938, and Hough to Crowninshield, 14 May 1938, Ancient Box 6, GEWA. Also see SMR, July 1942. 34 SMR, April 1947.
collection. Hough conveniently solved that problem, however, with the aforementioned "kodachrome movies." In many respects, Johnson was the Joice Heth of his day. Although a century had passed since P.T. Barnum toured the country selling opportunities to see and touch Washington’s alleged wet nurse (see chapter one), that particular mode of object reverence persisted at Washington’s birthplace into the 1930s and beyond.

And although the Monument is certainly not unique in this regard, it is vitally important that we recognize the extent to which Johnson’s employ and its consequent empowerment of an especially prickly sort of Old South nostalgia was first, Federally sanctioned, and, second, a direct result of the controversy surrounding Building X. Johnson was Hough’s solution to the problem of a Memorial House that was not what it pretended to be. Hough offered Johnson up to visitors as a more reliable link to Washington, one that simultaneously recalled how good life was back when racial and class categories were clearly defined and easily managed. Because it was deployed at a national monument, this was a Federally-supported interpretive theme. That is, visitors to Washington’s birthplace during the 1930s were taught important lessons about Washington and his times by watching an elderly black man literally slave away in tobacco and cotton fields.

The Rebirth of Living History

We must, on some level, be outraged by the story of ‘Uncle’ Annanias Johnson. But, despite its cornucopia of thinly veiled racially-coded messages, Hough’s living farm idea anticipated a new way of doing public history in this country. If the Memorial House’s connotative imprecision permitted the proliferation of unsavory interpretive
messages concerning race and class, it also demanded innovation—how else was Hough
to stem the tide of Building X backlash except by diverting attention away from the
house? His nascent living farm did just that, but it also resembled new directions in
interpretive thinking then percolating elsewhere in the NPS. In 1935, for example, NPS
Chief Historian Verne Chatelain delivered a paper to the American Planning and Civic
Association in which he described the NPS's commitment to "using the uniquely graphic
qualities" of historic sites to "breathe the breath of life into American history...to recreate
for the average citizen something of the color, the pageantry, and the dignity of our
national past." Iconicity, in other words, had become an NPS interpretive priority
and—thanks to Louise Crowninshield—Washington's birthplace occupied a forward
position on that front.

Other NPS sites had experimented with historical reconstruction, but none had
ventured further down the simulative path than had Washington's birthplace with its
replica Memorial House, Colonial Kitchen, and colonial crops—complete with their own
slave! Chatelain was aware of the controversy surrounding Building X and thus
understood the problems presented by irresponsible simulation. It was he, after all, who
wrote to Director Demaray in 1932 with concerns about the media's likely exploitation of
the Building X controversy (see chapter three). Because Chatelain was hired to
standardize, expand, and give credibility to NPS interpretive efforts throughout the Park

---

35 See chapter five, section C of Harlan D. Unrau and G. Frank Williss, Administrative History: Expansion
of the National Park Service in the 1930s (National Park Service, Denver Service Center: 1983),
36 As I mentioned in chapter three, Valley Forge provides another example of early NPS involvement in
historical simulation. At Valley Forge, the NPS spent years sorting through several generations of log
cabins that, though all built differently, were claimed to replicate the originals built by Washington's men.
37 Chatelain to Bryant and Demaray, 5 March 1932, NPS Records 17/25, GEWA.
system, it is important to note the influence of the Monument on Chatelain’s ideas about history, iconicity, and the possibilities for a ‘living’ history.\textsuperscript{38}

But Washington’s birthplace was neither the first nor only influence on Chatelain’s sense of a living past. Chatelain himself recalled his childhood in Nebraska where immersion within the “scene” of Lewis and Clarke’s explorations cultivated within him “the thought...of how important the physical site is to the effective realization of historical conditions and events.” Moreover, Chatelain later explained that, by 1931, he was aware of European museums and what they had “done with the physical sites and remains of history and that tourists swarmed to [those] places.”\textsuperscript{39} In chapter one we saw how object fetishism suffered in the metropolitan centers of Western Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries under, first, a wave of scientific rationalism and, later, a sort of post-revolutionary skepticism that allowed European historians to secularize their methodologies while American historians like George Bancroft still mused about this country’s divine favor.\textsuperscript{40} Americans like Charles Willson Peale and P.T. Barnum unwittingly perpetuated in this country old world ideas about objects and history as European intellectuals retreated into their texts and taxonomies.

Objects began to regain their currency in Europe, however, with the turn of the twentieth century and the proliferation of new representational technologies like photography and the cinema that fundamentally altered ideas about time, light, and space.\textsuperscript{41} These changes unfolded at a slower pace in the outlying regions of western

\textsuperscript{38} Regarding Verne Chatelain, see Hosmer, \textit{Preservation Comes of Age}, 513-16.
\textsuperscript{39} Chatelain cited in Hosmer, \textit{Preservation Comes of Age}, 514.
\textsuperscript{40} Dorothy Ross does a fine job of explaining this phenomenon in "Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America," 909-28.
\textsuperscript{41} For an insightful discussion about the impact of new technology on cultural forms and understanding at the turn of the twentieth century, see Stephen Kern, \textit{The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).
modernity where old and new forged curious bonds. In Scandinavia, for example, fin-de-siècle museums blended the aesthetics of modern mobility with the visceral materiality of early modern European curiosity cabinets. The result was a fascination throughout the region with what historian Mark Sandberg calls “living pictures,” displays that relied for their mimetic effect on the costuming and contextualizing of realistic mannequins. These mannequins, Sandberg argues, functioned as pictures of real bodies, human place holders that literally “body forth.” At a time in history when so many real bodies were forced out of place by population shifts resulting from economic and political upheaval throughout northern Europe, and when new technologies like film, photography, and sound recording problematized the ontological status of lived reality, the substitution of mannequins for missing bodies made representational sense to a culture coping with rapid change. Living pictures worked like any other kind of recording technology by putting into circulation materially accessible substitutes for what was otherwise exotic or unavailable.

But Scandinavian museums were only able to conjure the virtual by accentuating the real. A successful wax museum, for example, depended upon elaborate mise-en-scène effects for full mimetic impact. And what better to authenticate wax figures of famous people than the actual objects those individuals owned and used in real life. It was this re-introduction of authenticity fetishism into European ideas about objects and

---

42 Sandberg, Living Pictures, Missing Persons, 5.
43 The very manner in which mannequin tableaux were deployed in Scandinavian museums served didactic ends by cultivating an etiquette of looking appropriate to urban public space. For onlookers, immersion in living pictures often involved various entrapment scenarios where casual voyeurism might be permissible, but gawking or crossing the fine line between spectatorship and intrusion was discouraged. In this way, living pictures cultivated “voyeuristic competencies” akin to film and reminded the individual of his or her proper place within the urban totality. It was the state’s interest in this didactic purpose, Sandberg argues, that explains in part the widespread turn-of-the-century museological shift from taxonomy to virtuality.
the past that rekindled a phenomenon reminiscent of the early trade in saints' relics. Wax museums competed to get the most authentic objects for their museums and accounts of auctions held to liquidate defunct museums reveal that bidders valued the famous objects more than the actual mannequins. At the same time, European intellectuals had—through their various reactions to the onslaught of western modernity—begun to give shape to an entirely new academic discipline, sociology. Sociology’s antipositivist interest in human cultural response to change prompted academic and lay collectors alike to gather as quickly as possible the artifactual remnants of traditional European folkways before they vanished. This ethnographic impulse found especially active expression during the late nineteenth century in, unsurprisingly, Scandinavia. Artur Hazelius's Skansen museum, which opened near Stockholm, Sweden in 1891 and which displayed hundreds of mannequins dressed in traditional Lapland costumes surrounded by simulated huts and naturalistic settings, typically gets credit for being the first large-scale open air ethnographic folk museum of its kind.

But Hazelius's Skansen Museum did more than simply legitimize living pictures as serious scholarly endeavor. At Skansen, the objects were so "real" that Hazelius replaced his mannequins with live costumed interpreters lest the objects out-authenticate their contexts. Not unlike patriotic American ladies associations who, starting during the mid-nineteenth century, dressed up like their forbears to serve tea in historic buildings, Skansen employees donned traditional garb and worked livestock on real farms outfitted with reconstructed vernacular buildings. Both celebrated national history and both literally brought the past to life. But, unlike the American examples, Skansen placed a premium on authenticity and, as such, garnered widespread acclaim as a serious historical
methodology. As early as 1878, for example, Hazelius impressed crowds at the Paris World’s Fair with a living tableau portraying Scandinavian folkways. The example spread and Verne Chatelain’s reference to the popularity of European museums and what they had done with “physical sites” reveals the impact of Hazelius’s example in this country by the 1930s.

Breathing the ‘Breath of Life’ Into American Museums

That example found significant expression in the United States at two museums that, though opening within a year of each other, deployed Hazelius’s methodology to very different ends. Henry Ford opened his Greenfield Village in 1934 not far from his home just outside of Dearborn, Michigan. Ford had already assembled a massive collection of objects paying tribute to America’s industrial history, but Greenfield Village mobilized those objects throughout a large-scale outdoor living museum staffed and operated by costumed interpreters. Having himself played an important role in the country’s industrial history, Ford sought to tell a very specific story at Greenfield and, to that end, managed every aspect of planning at the museum. There, visitors moved through a contrived town assembled of over a hundred buildings transplanted from throughout the country into one cohesive vision of the American past. Ford is perhaps most noted for saying of his museum, “I am collecting the history of our people as written into things their hands made and used…When we are through, we shall have reproduced American life as lived, and that, I think, is the best way of preserving at least a part of our history and tradition.”

---

44 See Melinda Young Frye, "The Beginnings of the Period," 229-30.
45 For brief discussions of Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village, its relationship to Colonial Williamsburg, and Ford’s particular museological philosophy, see Marling, Washington Slept Here, 285-87, and Mike Wallace, "Visiting the Past."
Just a year before Greenfield Village opened, another museum of particular relevance to our story made its public debut only ninety miles south of Washington’s birthplace. Although he supported the WNMA’s fundraising campaign and made lavish contributions to Yellowstone National Park, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. devoted the lion’s share of his philanthropic largesse to the realization of Reverend W.A.R. Goodwin’s dream to restore Williamsburg, Virginia to its late eighteenth-century grandeur. The eyes of the nation watched during the late 1920s and 1930s as Colonial Williamsburg rose almost magically from the old concrete sidewalks and paved streets of modern Williamsburg. Unlike Ford’s project at Dearborn Village, Colonial Williamsburg was restored in situ and Rockefeller hired legions of planners to undertake the work. Newspapers and popular magazines across the country—including National Geographic—showcased the restoration process underway at Williamsburg. The NPS was intimately aware of Rockefeller’s ‘other’ project. Horace Albright, retired from the NPS, sat on the project’s Board of Directors. Louis Cramton, who was instrumental in shaping the legislation responsible for creating Washington’s birthplace, also drafted the bill that gave life to Colonial National Monument in March 1931. That bill included an open invitation for Rockefeller to make Colonial Williamsburg a part of the NPS. Rockefeller never accepted, but everyone involved with historic parks within the NPS—including Superintendent Hough—recognized the significance of the interpretive example set by the Williamsburg restoration.46

46 The most recent account of the Williamsburg restoration is Anders Greenspan, Creating Colonial Williamsburg (Washington & London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002). Also see Handler and Gable, The New History in an Old Museum, 31-37; and Hosmer, Preservation Comes of Age, especially 11-73. Although Hough does not explicitly say so, it is obvious that he considered Colonial Williamsburg a model for interpretive planning at Washington’s birthplace. Hough’s crop demonstration exhibit speaks to that influence. It is interesting to note, though, that because Hough lacked Colonial Williamsburg’s massive financial resources and consequently was less scrutinized by the public eye, he enjoyed a degree of
Appearing as they did during the 1930s, both Greenfield Village and Colonial Williamsburg sought to fortify a nation beset by economic collapse with vivid living narratives concerning American greatness. Both, however, cast their stories in remarkably racist and classist terms. At Williamsburg, for example, all of the restored buildings portrayed in their chosen furnishings lifestyles far beyond the means of typical colonial Americans. And, in a town whose population was divided equally between whites and blacks during the late eighteenth century, well-dressed white interpreters certainly conveyed the wrong ideas about the reality of revolutionary Virginia. Colonial Williamsburg sanitized and manipulated the past in exactly the same way Superintendent Hough did by putting ‘Uncle’ Annanias on display in Wakefield’s tobacco fields.

Although Colonial Williamsburg did not at that time attempt to interpret slavery, it nonetheless conveyed historical meaning of questionable legitimacy and did so on a remarkably large scale. That said, nobody in the museum community at that time, in their rush to frame the colonial scene, considered the larger mimetic implications of real people standing in for historical objects—real people who, though perhaps manageable within a cinematic frame, could not ultimately be cropped into a static still life.

But the excitement caused by Deerfield Village and Colonial Williamsburg precluded any concern about either’s pedagogical value and calls for living agricultural museums issued forth throughout the country during the 1940s. Those calls were answered immediately following World War II at museums like Old Sturbridge Village interpretive freedom impossible at Colonial Williamsburg. W.A.R. Goodwin, for example, wanted to interpret slavery at Williamsburg but was unable given pressure from Rockefeller to stick with architectural interpretation. See Greenspan, *Creating Colonial Williamsburg*, 28-29.

47 Camille Wells, "Interior Designs," 89-111.
Several factors made the postwar years especially fertile for the growth of living history museums. I argued in chapter four that the rise of male museum professionals and the postwar proliferation of house museums triggered a widespread investment in iconicity. Places like Washington's birthplace increasingly staked their credibility on the authenticity of their iconic relics. Embedded within that institutionalized authenticity fetishism was a not-so-subtle suggestion that the answers to modern problems resided in the not entirely irretrievable past. Thus America's longstanding love affair with antimodernism lingered in the shadowy recesses of the Colonial Revival.

Yet, a question of legitimacy remained even in the immediate postwar years—does iconicity make for serious history? Recalling Stewart Hobbs' argument, house museum and period room curators invested in iconicity because they felt a closer kinship with art historians than with historians of the American past. "Serious" academic historians had for so long and so vigorously privileged textual evidence that material culture found few friends within the academy even into the middle of the twentieth century. Even museums occasionally questioned the legitimacy of material evidence as with Hough's dismissal of historical archeology at Washington's birthplace. But once again, emergent European intellectual trends fanned the flames of American living

---

48 Regarding the spread of interest in living agricultural museums, see Leon and Piatt, "Living-History Museums," 70. The years between 1945 and 1965 witnessed an explosion of museums and historic sites that embraced some form of living history interpretation. These include but are not limited to The Farmers' Museum, New York (1944), Old Sturbridge Village, Massachusetts (1946), Plimoth Plantation, Massachusetts (1947), Shelburne Museum, Vermont (1947), Museum Village, New York (1950), Old Salem, North Carolina (1950), Historic Deerfield, Massachusetts (1952), Landis Valley Museum, Pennsylvania (1953), Hagley Museum, Delaware (1957), Hope Lodge, Pennsylvania (1957), Hancock Shaker Village, Massachusetts (1960), Erie Canal Museum, New York (1962), Quiet Valley Living Historical Farm, Pennsylvania (1963), and Strawberry Banke, New Hampshire (1965).

history. During the first half of the twentieth century and, in large part, resulting from the work of the same thinkers responsible for granting projects like Hazelius’s Skansen museum scholarly legitimacy, European historians increasingly looked to material, geographical, and sociological evidence for insights regarding overarching historical structures. A new breed of social historians—especially French scholars like Fernand Braudel and other members of the so-called Annales School—sought historical understanding through an examination of the small seemingly mundane material details of everyday life.49

Their influence filtered into the work of British historian E.P. Thompson whose *Making of the English Working Class* (1963) is commonly recognized as the foundational work in the rise of what has come to be known as the New Social History. Thompson’s account of English artisan culture at the turn of the nineteenth century explored for the first time in any significant way the lives of common people in whom Thompson recognized considerable agency to effect real historical change. Thompson’s so-called “bottom-up” approach did for textual history what Hazelius did for museum history—both championed the history of common people who, often illiterate and disenfranchised, left little behind but material objects from which to reconstruct their stories.50 It also spoke to a new generation of young American historians who, during the 1950s and early 1960s, had invested unprecedented energy toward dismantling institutionalized racism throughout the United States. American intellectuals vested in the Civil Rights

---

movement sought, like Thompson, to rewrite history to include generations of historical actors too long denied a role in this country’s official memory.

The American museum community took note. In 1965, historian Marion Clawson proposed “that we establish in the United States a system of living operating historical farms, to portray some of the main elements of U.S. agricultural history.”51 Clawson’s mandate melded the intellectual agenda of a new generation of social historians with the possibilities presented by telling the story of average Americans through the objects that simultaneously expressed and delineated their historical saga.52 It garnered particular attention from the Smithsonian Institution. The Smithsonian’s curator of agriculture, John Schlebecker, answered Clawson by creating the Living Historical Farms Project. Schlebecker proposed to evaluate extant Smithsonian programs with living farm potential in search for an opportunity to create a nation-wide program. The project did not produce any concrete results, but it did promote additional interest in the living farm idea and encouraged emergent living history programs like that at Darwin Kelsey’s Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts. Kelsey’s conversion of the old Freeman family homestead into a working farm demonstrated the perfect interpretive fit between operational historic farms, costumed interpretation, and hands-on exhibits. A symposium at Old Sturbridge Village in 1970 resulted in the creation of the Association for Living Historical Farms and Agricultural Museums (ALHFAM). That organization, operating under the auspices of the Smithsonian, grew quickly into the most prominent supporter of living history

51 Marion Clawson, “Living Historical Farms,” 110.
museums in the United States and, as such, bore various degrees of influence on virtually
every living history operation begun in following years.\textsuperscript{53}

**MISSION 66 and the Path to Living History in the NPS**

The NPS had, all the while, become immersed within its own rejuvenation project. Crippled by heavy postwar visitation and unable to pay for infrastructural improvements, the NPS suffered harsh public criticism during the early 1950s.\textsuperscript{54} Director Conrad Wirth responded by proposing a massive ten-year program to improve and modernize facilities, staffing, and resource management strategies. Wirth proposed MISSION 66 in 1955 and work officially began in February 1956 with the hope of completing upgrades in every park in time for the Agency’s fiftieth anniversary in 1966. MISSION 66 focused the lion’s share of its energies on physical improvements, including the construction of new visitor centers and visitor facilities. But Agency planners also paid attention for the first time in any serious way to visitor experience and how and what visitors learned at national parks. At Washington’s birthplace, for example, MISSION 66 made efforts to organize and take stock of what had, by the mid-1950s, become a formidable collection of largely unorganized artifacts. NPS Chief of Interpretation Ronald Lee temporarily assigned a trained curator to the birthplace in March 1955 specifically to catalog Memorial House and Colonial Kitchen furnishings. The curator and her team determined that the replacement cost of all furnishings and

\begin{align*}
\textsuperscript{53} & \text{Jay Anderson suggests that the 1974 issue of } \textit{Museum News} \text{ “is a benchmark for the living history movement. With this issue of the journal of the American Association of Museums, historical simulation became respectable as a medium of museum interpretation.” See Robert Ronsheim, “Is the Past Dead?” in Jay Anderson, } \textit{A Living History Reader, Volume One, Museums} \text{ (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1991).} \\
\textsuperscript{54} & \text{Visitation increased during this period from 6 million visitors in 1942 to 33 million in 1950 to 72 million in 1960. Mackintosh, } \textit{The National Parks: Shaping the System}, 64. \text{ Mackintosh also provides a useful survey of Mission 66 initiatives as does John Ise, } \textit{Our National Park Policy}. \text{ George B. Hartzog, Jr., who was the director of the NPS during Mission 66, provides useful discussions of these years in } \textit{Battling for the National Parks} \text{ (Mt. Kisco, New York: Moyer Bell Limited, 1988).}
\end{align*}
other artifacts valued at fifty dollars or more—about 900 in all—to be roughly $73,000—an impressive collection at the time for such a modest park. 55

The same curatorial team also discovered that, despite its impressive collection, the birthplace suffered from years of curatorial neglect. They discovered within the Memorial House, for example, rodent and insect damage, rotting wood and textiles, rusting flatware and wall fixtures, and historic letters decomposing as props on desks and tables. 56 But, if interpretation suffered at Washington’s birthplace, it was not from curatorial laxity alone. A team of superintendents gathered at the Park in April 1961 as part of a MISSION 66 initiative to assess visitor impressions at Washington’s birthplace. Not since Rodnick’s 1941 report had the birthplace been so frankly criticized:

In our opinion we learned very little of George Washington’s childhood...The MISSION of the George Washington birthplace National Monument, as presently stated, is “to commemorate the birth and boyhood of George Washington and to present the story of his family background in these formative years.” A pleasant pastoral scene is presently being maintained. With this exception we believe that the MISSION is not being fulfilled. 57

Superintendent Gibbs used the review to justify his ongoing requests for “a field conference...to get all levels of planning...squared away on just what our Service’s MISSION 66 plans are.” 58 Gibbs would not get his meeting for another four years. In the meantime, the NPS grew increasingly interested in living history and, whether or not

55 See Chief of the Division of Interpretation Ronald Lee to Elbert Cox, 8 December 1954, HFC; and SMR, March 1955, July 1955, April 1958, and October 1959.
56 NPS Museum Division Preservation Specialist Harry Waldrus to Chief of the Museum Branch, 23 March 1955, HFC.
58 Gibbs to unknown recipient, NPS Records 10/25, GEWA.
anyone knew it in 1961, Washington’s birthplace was soon to become a test bed for a very new way of doing history.\textsuperscript{59}

The NPS, like the Smithsonian, responded favorably to Marion Clawson’s call for a national chain of living farm museums and soon a rivalry developed between the two to become the official guardian of the country’s agricultural history. Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall learned about the Smithsonian’s quick response to Clawson’s call and, in turn, appointed Roy Appleman to determine how the NPS might also assert itself in the very new world of living history. NPS Director George Hartzog shared Udall’s interests and pressured Appleman to work with haste. Appleman organized a committee in 1966 to identify parks especially well suited for living history initiatives and Washington’s birthplace made the short list. The Monument had, after all, already dabbled in costumed interpretation by 1967 when the NPS required all of its parks to put at least some front-line interpreters in costume. Living history and costumed interpreters would, within only a few years, be the norm rather than a novelty. By 1974, 114 parks boasted full-blown living history programs.\textsuperscript{60}

Washington’s birthplace led the pack. MISSION 66 never achieved the kind of change it envisioned at the Monument, but it did initiate a series of planning efforts that ultimately supported the Park’s investment in living history. Park Historian Thomas J. Harrison had already begun, for example, to revise the Park’s interpretive prospectus in 1966 when Roy Appleman personally visited the Park and expressed the director’s desire

\textsuperscript{59} In March 1965, Regional Curator Elizabeth Albro, Chief of Interpretation and Visitor Services Charles Shedd, Chief Historian Thomas Harrison, and the Monument’s management assistant met to discuss an interpretive prospectus and furnishing plan for the birthplace. SMR, March 1965, NPS Records 10/25, GEWA.

that Washington's birthplace take it upon itself to become a model for living history within the NPS. Appleman reviewed Harrison's plan in 1967, found it inadequate, and assigned a specialist to the task. NPS Naturalist Ernst Christensen suggested that the Park create an eighteenth-century style farm "as historically accurate as possible," but without conveying a "zoo atmosphere" or otherwise appearing like a mere "animal show." The park should, according to Christensen, "endeavor to provide the sights, sounds and the way of life seen, heard, and experienced by the child, boy, and young man, George Washington." Washington's birthplace stood thus poised in 1967 to recreate itself after thirty-five years of interpretive uncertainty—the nation's fast approaching bicentennial offered the perfect motivation.

In response to Christensen's suggestions and pressures from Udall and Hartzog, Washington's birthplace compiled a master plan in 1968 that, for the first time since 1930, proposed to fundamentally redefine commemoration and interpretation at the Monument. It proposed to remove all non-interpretive buildings—including comfort stations, storage sheds, stables, and even the Parking lot and Hough's old administration building—from the core historic area and to dramatically expand the living farm operation. The plan's language is clearly crafted to shift the Park's focus away from

---

61 Mackintosh discusses this in Interpretation in the National Park Service. Also see 1966 rough draft of Thomas J. Harrison, "Interpretive Prospectus for George Washington birthplace National Monument," Seth Box 4, GEWA.


63 The master plan also called for—in a surprising return to the pre-war era—revival of the Log House as a restaurant and lodge. Acting Assistant Director of Cooperative Activities Raymond Freeman argued against reviving the Log House Tea Room lest it fall victim to its previous fate and suggested that the building be used as quarters for seasonal hires and for other management purposes. Interest in resurrecting the Log House followed proposals to create a "Potomac Heritage Trail" intended to link the Monument with Ferry Farm, Williamsburg, and Yorktown. It is not clear who proposed the heritage trail though it is evident that the proposal never came to fruition. See Oculus, "Cultural Landscape Report," v. 1, 2.88-2.89 for details concerning this proposal and additional descriptions of the 1968 master plan.
commemoration of the adult Washington and toward a critical engagement with the physical and intellectual context of his early life. In addition to calling for "presentation of the farm as the boy Washington knew it," the plan proposed more archeological research, self-guided nature walks, seasonal interpretation of waterfowl populations, a sizeable visitor center, improved law enforcement, and a variety of smaller improvements. And although the plan did not specifically identify Building X as the actual site of Washington's birth, it did point in that direction and demanded that further archeological work be performed to clarify the issue.

The Park's new master plan caught the attention of NPS planners and in April 1968 the largest interpretive planning conference "ever assembled in the Service" met at Washington's birthplace to discuss the Park's new direction. Everyone agreed that the Memorial House furnishings should be made "more human in aspect" and less like a museum so that "the furnishings suggest activities." Agreement similarly surrounded expansion of the Park's living farm although the "fish nets, fish barrels, net house, wharf and boat mentioned as required features" never appeared in the final project. Most significantly, the conference put forth in plain language evolving attitudes about the Building X controversy: "we will probably have to get off the pot on calling this Building 'X.' If it is the site where George Washington was born, we should summon a little more dignity and call it the birthplace Site." 

Positive movement toward an honest assessment of Building X indicated the extent to which the NPS, by 1968, had become willing and able to divest itself of

---

64. This meeting included Bill Holliman, Don Jackson, Bob Walker, Bob Nash, Ernst Christensen, Don Benson, Rick Krepela, Al Sift, Charles Hatch, Charles Shedd, and Alan Kent—"Others joined the group from time to time." See Kent to Shedd, 22 August 1968, HFC.

65. Ibid. This memo summarizes discussions held at the conference on the afternoon of August 20, 1968.
longstanding interpretive baggage. In actuality, Superintendent Gibbs had already urged the Regional Director to be frank about Building X although Gibbs understood that "some members [of the WNMA]...insist that the house is on the exact site of the birthhome."\(^6\) The NPS required hard evidence, though, before making any changes. That is exactly what they got from an archeological assessment included in the 1968 master plan. Archeologist Bruce Powell examined the Monument in 1968 and produced a report that supported the conclusions put forth by David Rodnick's report over two decades earlier. Powell did not mince words regarding Building X. He suggested "that Building X be re-excavated, stabilized, and permanently exhibited to the public...I also recommend that it be identified as the birth site of George Washington."\(^6\) Although the Park remained conflicted about how to proceed with regard to Building X, it publicly celebrated the opening of its new living farm on June 18, 1968.\(^6\)

**A Visit to Washington’s Birthplace, Circa 1970**

In this way, several trends—including the popularization of living history, the rise of New Social History, the granting of academic legitimacy to the new field of historical archeology, and the persistence of old-order object fetishism—all converged at the birthplace in just the right way and at just the right time to spark what, in hindsight, amounted to an interpretive revolution. Although the Monument's core historic area had

---

\(^6\) Gibbs to Regional Director, 29 February 1964, NPS Records 10/25, GEWA.

\(^6\) See Beasley, "The Birthplace of a Chief," 214-15. Just a few months after Powell submitted his report, former ranger-historian Charles Hatch completed his *Chapters in the History of Popes Creek Plantation*. Hatch first entered duty at the Monument as a student technician in June 1937, just prior to entering the doctoral program in history at the University of Virginia. Hough commented that "it is hoped he may find time for research" in SMR, June 1937. Hatch's volume is the most substantial study of Washington family history within the Northern Neck of Virginia and remains the most thorough treatment of Monument history. Carson, "The Growth and Evolution of Interpretation," 4117. Robert Nash's interpretive prospectus rounded out this triumvirate. Nash distilled the main themes put forth in the 1968 master plan into a series of guides for each interpretive unit (e.g. Memorial Mansion, Colonial Kitchen, etc.) and created something of a how-to guide for would-be tour leaders. Ibid., 4117-4118.

\(^6\) "Living" Colonial Farm at George Washington birthplace to Open June 18," press release for 16 June 1968, HFC.
always been construed as an interpretive landscape—by superintendents and visitors alike—creation of the living farm transformed that landscape in ways that shifted interpretive focus away from the Memorial House and toward what had become a living, functional landscape. An old maintenance shed, for example, now housed costumed interpreters practicing and discussing eighteenth-century crafts. The 1968 master plan required the conversion of outdated restrooms into a spinning and weaving room; construction of a corncrib; an oxen shed; a small tobacco barn; and various livestock pens. All of these framed the colonial picture at Washington’s birthplace so as to evoke an eighteenth-century plantation. Hough’s colonial crops returned with vigor in 1973 when the Park planted 140 acres in grains and tobacco to feed livestock and interpret colonial agricultural practices. In sum, these additions permitted Monument staff to use the landscape as a tool by which to interpret George Washington’s lived experience rather than, as had been done more-or-less until that point, to simply honor his memory. No change in the landscape better demonstrates this new interpretive bent than the identification in 1973—using hedges and special grasses—of the foundations of Building X or, as it had come to be known, the “original foundation of the Washington home (figure 29).”

All of these changes translated into a very different experience for park visitors. Visitors approaching the Park from Route 204 once drove past the old granite obelisk directly into the Monument’s core historic area, figuratively spanning distant centuries in about a quarter mile. The Park constructed a new visitor center in 1976 that altered the visitor’s path, forcing them south around the obelisk into a new parking lot and a

---

69 See Oculus, “Cultural Landscape Report,” v. 1, 2.92.
70 SAR, 1973, HFC.
71 SAR, 1974, HFC.
substantial visitor center tucked behind a bluff beyond eye shot of the Memorial House. 72 Where Superintendent Hough once intercepted visitors and set the interpretive tone for the remainder of their visit, now a host of artifactual exhibits and a film emphasized themes more appropriate to the Monument’s living farm. 73 The film—“A Childhood Place”—especially drove home the significance of Wakefield’s landscape. The land itself, according to the film’s narrator, conveyed to and cultivated within George Washington the values that elevated him to greatness later in life.74

Thus oriented, visitors exited out the back of the building onto an earthen trail that, also hidden beyond view of the Memorial House, wrapped along the Popes Creek shoreline for several hundred feet until emerging in front of an outline—first in box hedges which were later replaced by crushed oyster shells—of the Building X foundations. From this vantage point, visitors caught their first glimpse of the Memorial House foregrounded by a visual reference to the size and shape of Washington’s actual birth house. For the first time in Monument history, the Memorial House ceded authenticity to its mysterious referent. This is not to say that the Memorial House was completely excised from the Park’s interpretive agenda. Quite the opposite, the Memorial House had become a bustling hive of costumed interpretation. Beginning in 1972, Park rangers offered regularly scheduled tours of the Monument’s new living landscape. Inside the Memorial House, employees dressed in eighteenth-century costume demonstrated quilting, spinning, flower arranging, carding, needlepoint, and pewter

72 The Monument keeps uncatalogued documents regarding construction of the Visitor Center in that building’s basement. Also see NPS Records 17/25, GEWA for 1960s and 70s correspondence and progress reports regarding this project and the Bicentennial at GEWA.
73 Information desk daybooks kept by rangers during the late 1970s and stored in the Monument’s archives provide glimpses into the daily routines—and frequent monotony—of desk attendants. See Visitor Center day books, NPS Records 23/25, GEWA.
74 The film was produced by Rick Krepele of the HFC is still shown today in the Visitor Center’s 110-seat sloped auditorium.
Colonial Kitchen interpreters prepared Washington family recipes with vegetables from the Colonial Garden and offered samples to visitors. When not cooking, the kitchen staff made beeswax candles and soap and described procedures for stringing lemons for drying, washing wool, and drying herbs (figure 30).

The show continued outside. A few hundred feet southwest of the Memorial House, in the field where Hough once staged portions of his colonial crop demonstration, a costumed ox-driver discussed and demonstrated eighteenth-century techniques for using draught animals. Everywhere they looked, visitors saw real people in real historical dress doing real historical things. In fact, Park employee regulations required that all outdoor tasks—including maintenance—be undertaken in colonial costume and with eighteenth-century methods when possible. Even employees hired as maintenance personnel donned costumes and formed the front-line interpretive force at Washington's birthplace. Park Historian Paul Carson notes, “ultimately this situation would lead to a gradual transition of farm workers from being employed as laborers on the maintenance staff to interpreters on the interpretive staff over the next few years.”

In 1973, for the first time, all interpretive staff donned “fully documented period clothing” and so fulfilled the living history concept envisioned by the various planning initiatives undertaken between 1968 and 1971.

75 The WNMA assisted with costumed interpretation inside the Memorial House and at various craft demonstrations throughout the Park. Warmed by their new increasingly visible role at the birthplace, the WNMA provided funds for purchase of more accurate costumes for themselves and for park employees. Carson, “The Growth and Evolution of Interpretation,” 4119.
77 Development concept, 1970, NPS Records 19/25, GEWA.
The Circle Completed

We began this chapter with Mrs. C.C. Warfield who, in 1959, visited Washington’s birthplace and berated Superintendent Gibbs and his staff for degrading Washington’s memory with “shabby” furnishings and their own uncertainty about the actual site of the birth house. Imagine if she had returned ten years later to a Memorial House staffed by rag-clad interpreters amid unmown dung-strewn fields. It is likely that, under such circumstances, Warfield’s outrage would have prevented her from even entering the Memorial House. To some extent, this is exactly why living history found such wide support among planners concerned with the problem of interpretation at the birthplace. The contest for legitimacy between the Memorial House and Building X had so long dominated interpretive efforts that the NPS desperately sought a diversion. Living history offered just that. Craft demonstrations, working ox teams, and a whole host of living tableaux conjured exactly the kind of spectacle that drew visitor attention away from the Memorial House. Moreover, dirt-smudged interpreters muscling ox teams through tobacco fields implied an air of authenticity that the birthplace had never before been able to muster. To the casual visitor willing to temporarily suspend disbelief, this new regime of historical objects looked, smelled, and sounded just like the real thing.

Washington’s birthplace had finally achieved by 1970 exactly the kind of radical signification Superintendent Hough so doggedly pursued decades prior. How, Hough had wondered, could the Memorial House be compelled to signify anything other than the buried foundations of Building X, an object that constantly threatened to pull aside the curtain and reveal the Memorial House’s own mimetic trickery? Committed as he was to the loci sanctorum and the power of indexicality—commemorative devices first
cultivated at Popes Creek by G.W.P. Custis over a century before—Hough found his answer in 'Uncle' Annanias Johnson. Johnson was a living relic with direct physical ties to the landscape responsible for birthing George Washington. He also conveniently distracted visitors from the controversies surrounding the Memorial House and Building X. Hough’s lament of Johnson’s death in 1937 was not that of one friend for another, but rather the lament of a lost opportunity—what would Hough do without Johnson’s considerable indexical clout, how else would he keep the Memorial House’s connotative powers at bay? Hough’s ill-fated campaign during the late 1930s and 1940s to create a museum to display his collection of lesser indexical relics (see chapter four) was obviously an attempt to compensate for the loss of his most powerful object. Louise Crowninshield’s introduction of aggressive iconicity sealed the fate of Hough’s efforts to check the Memorial House’s symbolic power with indexical relics.

It also set the stage for a new mimetic strategy. Crowninshield convinced the NPS that iconic relics—if tasteful and properly placed—could, in fact, substitute for indexical relics while performing the same legitimization function. Crowninshield’s furnishings granted the Memorial House a kind of authenticity that, temporarily at least, arrested the building’s power to signify outward. That is, her authentic furnishings and evocative interiors so effectively clamored for visitor attention that questions about Building X briefly subsided. But even that was not enough to control the Memorial House. Nothing less than a total redefinition of the commemorative experience at Washington’s birthplace could control the Memorial House for any period of time. Living history offered just that: full-scale high-order iconicity, a complete and totalizing simulacrum. Once the NPS accepted that icons could substitute for indices, it became
possible to put replica tools in the hands of costumed interpreters and then watch them literally make history. During the late 1960s and 1970s, the Memorial House consequently faded into the landscape and living history appeared to make great gains toward controlling historical meaning-making at Washington’s birthplace.

But two significant problems remained. First, although living history temporarily reigned in the Memorial House, it also masked critical gaps in the story told about George Washington and his life at Popes Creek. What about Washington’s slaves? As evidenced by Superintendent Hough’s reports, visitors had been asking the question since the early 1930s. Hough responded with what might properly be considered the opening act of living history at Washington’s birthplace: “Uncle” Annanias Johnson. Put on display as a living relic, Johnson’s role at Wakefield demonstrates how well object fetishism and racism complement one another. Johnson proved such an effective museum display that nobody bothered—or wanted—to realize that he was human. Park records do not include any personnel data concerning Johnson and there is no evidence that he was formally employed by the government. In this way, Hough’s desire to escape into the comfortable world of historical indexicality legitimized the objectification of a human being for didactic ends. It is no surprise that this kind of objectification spilled over into staff attitudes toward black visitors at a Federal park at a time, ironically, when the Federal government was determined to present the United States as a nation free of racial inequality.

The example of Annanias Johnson points to a second larger problem with the central premise of living history as practiced during the late 1960s and early 1970s at Washington’s birthplace: interpreters and their rusticated surroundings were not really
indexical relics, but rather icons masquerading as indices. As we will see in the concluding discussion, icons too convinced of their own indexicality tend to let loose a proliferation of unmanageable signs. The birthplace was never able to muster either the money or the stamina to construct a frame strong enough to control the living colonial picture created at Wakefield. It certainly could not create a frame capable of controlling the memories of those who recalled and remained firmly committed to old-order commemoration at the birthplace. The Park's encounter with Mrs. C.C. Warfield should have served as a reminder that not everyone was ready to abandon the Memorial House and its host of symbolic meaning—especially not the ladies of the Wakefield National Memorial Association.
AFTERWORD

In ways reminiscent of Washington’s 200th birthday in 1932, Americans found themselves swept up in patriotic celebrations leading to and surrounding the 1976 Bicentennial. Visitation boomed at Washington’s birthplace throughout the 1970s, peaking at nearly 205,000 in 1974. Those figures dropped to 136,000 during the Bicentennial year, but the celebrations continued against the backdrop of a new interpretive landscape.1 The Monument’s investment in living history during the late 1960s and 1970s was not unique. Living history programs spread throughout the park system during the mid-1970s. At the Monument, however, it marked a critical turning point in the history of a park that had long wrestled with crises of authenticity. The Monument’s Living Farm shifted visitor attention away from the Memorial House thereby creating a degree of interpretive freedom previously unavailable at the Birthplace. In this regard, although costumed interpretation proliferated throughout the park system and beyond, it played a particularly important role at Washington’s birthplace. Consequently, the Monument had earned, by the late 1970s, a reputation throughout the NPS for interpretive excellence.

1 NPS Records 15/25, GEWA contains descriptions of Bicentennial activities including a 1974 re-enactment, a 1975 essay and poster contest, living history school days, a special visitation day for disabled children, and a candlelight open house.
But even as the Park sought new ways to explore the possibilities presented by living history, shifts in Interior Department and NPS leadership conspired to chart a different path for parks during the 1980s. In response to the expansionist tendencies of NPS leadership during the 1970s, Director Russell Dickenson—appointed in 1980—favored a shoring up of extant resources over the addition of new parks. James G. Watt, who President Ronald Reagan appointed as Secretary of the Interior in 1981, agreed and encouraged the NPS to use its increasingly scant Federal funding to take care of what it already had. With less money, however, came more responsibilities. The 1970s had witnessed a renaissance in what park operators call resource management. Public historic sites increasingly turned their attention toward preserving endangered artifacts, buildings, and even landscapes. Managing those cultural and historic resources, however, cost money. During the late 1970s, the Federal government consolidated resource management tasks—including functions mandated by the National Register, the Natural and Historic Landmarks Programs, and the Land and Water Conservation Fund—under the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service. During the 1980s, however, those responsibilities were returned to the parks in hopes of cutting costs and streamlining resource management.

These new responsibilities presented considerable challenges at small parks like Washington’s birthplace. Everyone, even interpretive staff, shared the burden. Costumed interpreters devoted portions of their days to data entry. Maintenance staff spent increasingly more time filling out compliance forms. With a glut of new

---

2 Regarding changes in NPS leadership during the 1970s and the shift away from expansion during the 1980s, see Mackintosh, *The National Parks*, 86.
bureaucratic responsibilities, and as excitement surrounding the Bicentennial cooled during the late 1970s, more and more employees left the Park.\(^4\) At the same time, national energy crises during the late 1970s and early 80s raised operating costs and made it increasingly difficult for the Park to pay those employees who did stay on.\(^5\) To make things worse, the Monument did such a good job attracting visitors during the Bicentennial celebration that crowds returned year after year to use the Park's beaches and picnic facilities. So, by the early 1980s, the Monument found itself in the uncomfortable position of having more visitors, less money, and fewer employees with more duties than ever.\(^6\)

At the same time, the runaway expansion of the park system during the 1970s—what NPS Director James Ridenour would later attribute to so-called "park-barrel politics"—spilled into the Monument's backyard by way of the National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978.\(^7\) That legislation created fifteen new parks including Thomas Stone National Historic Site (THST). Lawyer Thomas Stone built his home, which he called Haberdeventure, in Charles County, Maryland in 1770. Six years later, finding himself caught up in Revolutionary politics, Stone earned fame by signing the Declaration of Independence. Stone eventually moved to Annapolis and Haberdeventure passed through a series of owners until burning down in 1977. Restoring the site and creating a Federal park there tantalized local politicians seeking to woo their

\(^5\) SAR, 1979, HFCA.
\(^6\) This particular problem is discussed in “Statement for Management,” 1979, NPS Records 15/25, GEWA.
constituencies. THST thus found its way into the national park system, though without a plan for its future and without anyone to manage the project. That responsibility fell to THST's nearest NPS neighbor, Washington's birthplace. But, nearly forty-five minutes away by car, THST created tremendous administrative, staffing, and financial challenges for the Monument. All of those challenges threatened the Park's living history program at a time when the Memorial House's interpretive dominance had only just been checked.

But, even without these threats, living history faced larger problems at Washington's birthplace and elsewhere throughout the park system. Despite the pedagogical potential of costumed interpretation, NPS Interpretive Specialist Frank Barnes suggested in 1973 that "our currently over-stressed living history activities may just possibly represent a tremendous failure on the part of our traditional interpretive programs—above all, a cover-up for lousy personal services."8 Moreover, Barnes worried that living history sometimes compromised the parks' ability to interpret serious historical issues. Specifically, he cited the Booker T. Washington National Monument's failure to present the harsh realities of slavery. Battlefield re-enactments and firearms demonstrations, Barnes argued, conjured a wholly irresponsible "impression of fun."9 Barnes was not alone. NPS historians Robert Utley, Roy Appleman, and John Luzader all expressed concern regarding the frequency with which living history demonstrations failed to encourage an understanding of parks and their significance.10 As time went on, it became increasingly apparent that, though living history certainly attracted a large

8 Cited in "Living History" in chapter three of Mackintosh, "Interpretation in the National Park Service."
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
visiting public, its educational value was suspect, especially when overzealous interpreters strayed too far a field of intended interpretive themes.\footnote{Warren Leon and Margaret Piatt refer to this phenomenon as an “almost-religious belief in living-history re-creation” in “Living History Museums,” 83. For a discussion of how living history presentations are always already ideological, see Mark Leone, “The Relationship Between Artifacts and the Public in Outdoor History Museums” in Jay Anderson, A Living History Reader, Volume One, Museums (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1991), 180. David Glassberg raises several questions living history advocates frequently fail to consider with regard to educational accountability in his critique of Jay Anderson’s Time Machines. See David Glassberg, “Living in the Past” in American Quarterly, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Summer, 1986), 305-10. For one of the most frequently cited considerations of problems common to living history interpretation, see Handler and Gable, The New History in an Old Museum.}

It is not my purpose here to critique the Monument’s living history program. It is, however, important to recognize that its success at Washington’s birthplace resulted from exactly the kind of hyperbole Barness and others feared. The Monument needed a spectacle as compelling if not more compelling than the Memorial House to move away from longstanding debates about objects and authenticity. It achieved that spectacle by reframing authenticity itself. Prior to the 1970s, for an object to be historically authentic at Washington’s birthplace, it had to demonstrate legitimacy through either some verifiable link to the Washington family or by having an expert like Crowninshield attest to its iconicity. During and after the 1970s, however, an object’s authenticity owed to its role within the elaborate stage set the Park had become.

Living history’s great accomplishment at the birthplace was its loosening of the ties that bound sign to referent. Nobody questioned the authenticity of a spinning wheel, for example, as it came to life in the hands of a costumed interpreter. Nor did the interpreters’ costumes raise questions among visitors assured of their colonialness. And who would even think to question the authenticity of an ox yoke while seeing the very land Washington once trod upon plowed up beneath it. In this way, the theatrical devices legitimized by living history enabled nearly any kind of object to make some claim to
authenticity—even the Memorial House—as long as it supported the larger narrative put forth by the Monument's interpretive staff. The ultimate arbiter of authenticity at Washington's birthplace had therefore become, by the end of the 1970s, whoever managed the living history program.

At the time, that person was Interpretive Specialist Dwight Storke. Storke grew up in the Northern Neck. His family owned property in the area for over three hundred years and claimed ancestral ties to the Washingtons. Storke studied history and education in college. He learned about living history at the Horace M. Albright Training Center at Grand Canyon National Park. When Storke entered into service at Washington's Birthplace in 1971, he brought a wealth of local knowledge and contagious enthusiasm to the living farm project. Storke championed daily tour programs, almost single-handedly created the Park's domestic crafts program, streamlined costumed interpretation, and even put on puppet shows for young visitors (figure 31).\textsuperscript{12} For his work, Storke received a special achievement award in 1972 for "special achievement in the formulation and operation of the living history interpretive program."\textsuperscript{13}

Storke's involvement at the Park constituted a remarkable moment in the story of Washington's birthplace. For the first time since Josephine Wheelwright Rust died in 1931, the strongest voice in matters of authenticity and interpretation belonged to a Northern Neck native with direct ties to George Washington. Dwight Storke did not begin the living history program at Washington's birthplace, but he did elevate it far

\textsuperscript{12} NPS Records 15/25, GEWA contains descriptions of Storke's marionette program.

\textsuperscript{13} SAR, 1972, HFCA. Additionally, Storke staged a three-day orientation program for interpretive staff that included a "seminar on methods and attitudes necessary to effectively interpret the feeling of the Colonial Era" and a packet containing historical information about the Washington family. Storke rounded out his orientation program with visits to other living history sites. See Dwight Storke, "An 18th Century Summer at George Washington's Birthplace," included with SAR, 1972, HFCA. In 1984, Storke received impressive recognition when Regional Director James Coleman, Jr. visited the Park to present him with the prestigious Freeman Tilden award for interpretive excellence. SAR, 1984, HFCA.
beyond what its originators imagined in 1968. And although Storke had trained for his work and was by all means a professional, he also maintained friendly relations with the elder members of the WNMA who he had known since childhood. Storke was a boon to the WNMA which must have been bewildered by the rapid succession of superintendents during the 1970s and 1980s. Unlike Superintendent Hough who stayed on at Wakefield for a remarkable twenty-one years and Superintendent Gibbs who held the job for eleven years, five superintendents came and went between 1970 and 1990, and none of those stayed more than eight years. But Dwight Storke remained devoted to the birthplace through it all. Park records reveal that Storke, perhaps more than anyone since Superintendent Hough, worked closely with the WNMA on joint commemorative programs, volunteer activities like costumed interpretation, and a host of social events. In many respects, the 1970s at Washington’s birthplace bore a striking resemblance to the 1930s.

That resemblance was due, in no small part, to the WNMA’s own remarkable persistence. The Association experienced significant change along with the rest of the Park during the late 1960s and 1970s. Despite new opportunities for involvement created by the Living Farm, the organization suffered a fifty-percent drop in membership between 1971 and 1973. Its remaining members, however, continued to vie for a hand in the presentation of the past at Washington’s birthplace. In 1976, the Park’s superintendent reported that, although its relationship with the WNMA was cordial, he worried about “the Ladies’ disinterest in the Park’s programs and some of the older members’ natural feelings of proprietorship...[We] occasionally have to remind one or

14 Very few records produced by or concerning the WNMA during the 1970s remain at GEWA today. This may be a result of the WNMA’s waning activity during these years.  
15 The WNMA counted 63 members in 1971 and only 29 in 1973. NPS Records 20/25, GEWA.
two of them that they can't go into the memorial house and change the furnishings around."  

The superintendent suggested that the WNMA reconstitute itself as a cooperating association rather than, as it had been since 1952, a concessionaire. Outwardly, the superintendent indicated this change would benefit the WNMA. Privately, he hoped the change would make them "know why they're here and what they can and cannot do."  

The WNMA agreed to the change, but only after the Park consented to an important clause in the new charter: "the Ladies must be considered in plans and decisions of the park especially as they affect the Memorial Mansion area."  

The Park agreed and in 1979 the Association changed its name to The George Washington Birthplace Memorial Association (GWBMA) to reflect its cooperative relationship with the NPS. With that, the GWBMA mustered its resources and, by the end of the following year, had increased its membership dramatically.  

But problems lurked amid what must have, at first, appeared like a victory in the battle for authority at Wakefield. Assured of fairness by the involvement of Dwight Storke and cheered by the Park's evident willingness to allow the GWBMA a helping hand in commemorating Washington at the Memorial House, the Association created its own furnishing committee. In June 1982, the committee met with NPS Regional Curator William Jedlick, Dwight Storke (who was chief ranger at that time), and the Park's resource and interpretation manager, Gina Moriarty. When asked for his thoughts on the  

---

16 Superintendent Don Thomson to Regional Director, 17 September 1976, NPS Records 15/25, GEWA. Also see Regional Chief of Interpretation and Visitor Services Chester Harris to H. Harston Smith, 17 October 1975, NPS Records 19/25, GEWA.  
17 Thomson to Regional Director, 17 September 1976, NPS Records 15/25, GEWA.  
18 "Statement for Management," 1979, NPS Records 15/25, GEWA.  
19 The GWBMA boasted 70 members by 1980. NPS Records 20/25, GEWA.
status of the Memorial House, Jedlick explained that though a furnishing study was needed and that some work was required to make the building’s furnishings consistent with what George Washington would have experienced, there was really nothing the GWBMA could or should do with regard to house furnishings. Instead, Jedlick suggested, the GWBMA should support interpretive activities elsewhere so as to de-emphasize the house’s traditionally prominent place on the memorial landscape.20

With just a few words, Jedlick had unwittingly undercut the GWBMA’s entire reason for being. His comments left the furnishing committee writhing. One member argued, “they have never understood the change,” implying that the NPS did not fully recognize that it had granted the GWBMA a right to involve itself with interpretation at the Memorial House. Moreover, they argued, the GWBMA and all its various antecedents had always supported all interpretive programming at the Park. Jedlick’s suggestion that they find ways to help out outside of the Memorial House insulted an organization that thought it had been doing just that. The furnishing committee fired back that the Park had not involved it in decisions regarding changes to the Memorial House. When Moriarty explained that the GWBMA had to clear changes with Monument staff even though staff could make changes without consulting the GWBMA, one member exclaimed, “we feel like all we are needed for is to make money...we are supposed to be an arm of the Park Service.” Toward the end of the meeting, a dismayed member lamented, “I just want to know what our role is.”21

20 GEWA possesses an uncatalogued audio recording of this 27 June 1982 meeting between the GWBMA Furnishing Committee, Bill Jedlick, and representatives of the Park.

21 Incredibly, this meeting involved some debate whether or not the Memorial House stood on the exact spot of Washington’s birth thereby revealing that the Building X controversy had not completely subsided by the 1980s.
That role, whatever it might have been, seemed to diminish year by year. The following year witnessed another setback for the GWBMA. Since 1932, the Association had operated a park post office. Popular with tourists for its unique Wakefield postage cancellation, the post office also served residents of the Northern Neck. It was integrated into the Park’s visitor center in 1976 along with a bookstore and gift shop operated by the Association. And, as of 1983, the post office still functioned as a community gathering point where neighbors picked up mail and exchanged niceties with Park staff and GWBMA members. That year, the superintendent decided that the NPS and the GWBMA would both benefit if the post office were shut down. He wrote to the community and explained that removing the post office would create enough space for the GWBMA’s bookstore to become “the definitive book store on George Washington.” He assured the post office’s customers that the GWBMA would continue to maintain a contract station where the unique postage cancellation might still be obtained. But local residents were not concerned about the cancellation so much as what the NPS’s actions revealed about its attitude toward the community. One neighbor wrote to Virginia Senator Paul Trible, explaining that “the people of Washington’s Birthplace need help…we feel we are asked to give up so much for so little gain for the park.”

That phrase—“the people of Washington’s Birthplace”—reveals that, even as late as the 1980s, the Park’s Northern Neck neighbors identified themselves, as their ancestors had ever since Custis’s visit and before, with the site of Washington’s birth. Reverence for it explains the GWBMA’s dogged commitment to the Memorial House just as it explains why the loss of a small post office meant giving up “so much.”

---

22 Superintendent George Church to Postmaster Robert Payne, 5 May 1983, Seth Box 4, GEWA.  
23 Church to park residents and postal customers, 6 May 1983, in Seth Box 4, GEWA.  
24 John Chewing to Senator Trible, 6 August 1983, in Seth Box 4, GEWA.
asking the community to give up its post office, no matter how insignificant it may have seemed to the superintendent, the Park effectively asked the community to relinquish its last physical claim to the site of Washington’s birth. That the Park could ask such a thing speaks to the failure of the NPS to preserve its own institutional memory at Washington’s birthplace. Who among NPS ranks understood, by 1983, how vested the GWBMA was in the Memorial House or why they were so? Who there understood the power and meaning of objects? The GWBMA still did, but now they had been evicted. The Association still exists today though under a different name. It continues to operate a gift shop at the birthplace, but otherwise remains invisible at the site that its progenitor brought to national attention.

The NPS’s dismissive handling of the GWBMA explains, in part, why the Park finds itself in a state of complete interpretive confusion today. As the Park’s relationship with the Association declined, so did the Living Farm. In 1989, for instance, the Park received a complaint from a visitor concerned about the infrequency of costumed interpretation and craft demonstrations. The problem had to do, in part, with reduced funding and staff limitations. But, more significantly for our purposes, it is evident that by the late 1980s, nobody understood the complicated history of competing relics at Washington’s birthplace. The GWBMA had been edged out and the Park staff had grown so transient that no one there could reconcile the uneasy juxtaposition of symbolic, indexical, and iconic relics that threatened once again to let loose a fierce volley of unbridled signification. The superintendent observed in 1989 that “the treatment of the living history area has not been consistent. The layout of the structures, the structures themselves, and the natural landscaping does not attempt to recreate an 18th century

25 Shelley Surfer to George Church, 1 September 1989, Central Administrative Files, GEWA.
planted. What has resulted is individual exhibit elements...set amongst landscaping that is mostly aesthetic."26 So, as the dust settled after twenty years of war between living history and old-order commemoration, all that remained was a simulative patchwork of quasi-historical tableaux and, of course, the Memorial House. Not knowing what to do, the superintendent and his staff looked the other way.

But, what about Dwight Storke, that great champion of living history? It just so happened that the Memorial House managed to reassert itself while Storke wasn’t looking. Storke had gone to superintend Richmond National Battlefield Park during the mid-1980s. When he returned to become superintendent of the birthplace in 1989, the damage had already been done. He tried hard to revive the Colonial Farm. By 1992, the Monument boasted fourteen acres of colonial crops, managed an impressive herd of registered Devon milking cattle, and enforced strict guidelines requiring everyone to stay in character while in the historic area.27

But, once again, without Storke, living history could not survive. In 1994, a new superintendent brought the Park into alignment with the NPS’s recent emphasis on resource conservation and management. He sponsored a study of the Park’s interpretive program in 1996 by scholars including James Horton and John Vlach. The evaluation team found the Birthplace dreadfully lacking and cited significant problems with the living history program including poorly informed interpreters who, in some cases, “insist that ‘no’ slaves served in a domestic capacity on the Washington estate.”28 Although

26 Church to Chief of History and Resource Management Louis Venuto, 6 January 1989, Central Administrative Files, GEWA.
27 See response to 1992 crop and livestock survey, Seth Box 3, GEWA; SAR, 1992, Central Administrative Files, GEWA; and Venuto to Interpretive Staff, 13 March 1990, NPS Records 23/25, GEWA.
28 "Historical Interpretation and the National Park Service at George Washington Birthplace National Monument,” 1 November 1996, GEWA.
living history had temporarily corralled the Memorial House, it did so—not unlike the
days of "Uncle" Annanias Johnson—only by deploying its own unfortunate
misrepresentations.

The Park has since undertaken a variety of planning initiatives intended to move
away from the living farm model. Its Comprehensive Interpretive Plan (CIP)—a
standardized NPS document that sets a park’s interpretive agenda—is clear in this regard.
It proposes to "shift from generic colonial plantation interpretation...to George
Washington’s life and accomplishments”; “shift from focusing on Washington’s young
years to his entire life of achievement”; and to “create an integrated and complete park
experience that goes beyond the commemorative area.”29 Additionally, the CIP
recognizes the interpretive conundrum presented by the Memorial House’s tendency to
wrest visitor attention away from the actual birth site and suggests, with remarkable
reflexivity for a NPS site, that perhaps the Park should consider recreating portions of the
commemorative landscape as it appeared when built during the 1930s. Despite the CIP’s
pledge to interpret the entirety of “Washington’s life and accomplishments”—although
he only lived at Popes Creek for three years—its suggestions are wise and begin, I think,
to put forth a framework for managing the birthplace’s glut of historical objects run
amuck.

But making plans is not the same as acting on them and, in the seven years since
the CIP was released, little has changed at Washington’s birthplace. As I noted in the
introduction, the Monument is a lovely place to visit, but what does it mean? Or, more
importantly, what do its objects mean? The “real” house—the foundations once referred
to as Building X—remains buried within eyeshot of the Memorial House. The

juxtaposition of the two (figure 29) is impossibly confusing. Which one is real? What relationship does the Memorial House bear to the buried foundations? If the Memorial House is not “real,” then why doesn’t the NPS let us see the “real” thing? Visitors ask all these questions and tour guides—sometimes costumed, sometimes not—respond with an equally baffling battery of quasi-answers. All the while, remnants of the old living history program literally wander throughout the landscape. Like decade-old signifiers left behind in the hasty retreat from living history, heritage livestock and costumed interpreters are more confusing than informative (figure 32).30 Sadly, after seventy-five years of interpretive struggle, many visitors leave the park thinking—as Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. warned in 1929—that the Memorial House is indeed the original building or, at least, a replica of it.

So, what exactly happened at Wakefield? The answer, quite simply, is “nothing.” At least, nothing, that is, since the discovery of Building X. Yes, the seven decades since then have witnessed a fascinating story unfold in the service of public memory, but nobody has ever managed to complete the commemorative process set into motion by the WNMA. What we see today at Washington’s birthplace is an unfinished commemorative project stymied by its own inability to make the past be what it wanted it to be. Had the NPS bulldozed the Memorial House seventy years ago, it is likely that none of this would have come to pass. But, fortunately, budget limitations render the NPS unable to bulldoze its bigger mistakes. I say fortunately, because the Memorial House preserves for us an important story about how Americans construct and remember their past. The Monument occupies an especially conspicuous role in that story given that it was at

---

30 The monument’s heritage breed livestock program is the most visible remnant of the living farm and continues to garner attention. See Rob Hedelt, “Bringing Back Old Breeds” in The Free Lance-Star, 2 December 2004: C1, C12.
Popes Creek that the Federal Government first decided to play a substantial role in how that past is remembered. Disagreements between the NPS and the WNMA concerning how to go about presenting Washington’s birthplace to the public point to rifts between how a government and its governed desire to be remembered. The avenues for inquiry in this regard are considerable: Who writes the past? Who does not? How is it decided what stories to tell? What stories are not told, and why not? The creation of Washington’s Birthplace National Monument in no way marks the beginning of public history in this country, but it does represent a significant flashpoint in its development that should be considered and interpreted at the Birthplace today.

And where better than the birthplace to explore the significance of the Colonial Revival, the influence of its women leaders, and the rapidly changing technologies of historical investigation that brought the NPS’s professional male staff into confrontation with a remarkably powerful ladies association. Pushing further back, we discover that the Memorial House’s insistent claims on our attention attest to the lasting commemorative imprint left by George Washington Parke Custis’s subtle, yet mnemonically potent first stone. Custis’s visit to Popes Creek itself constitutes a significant moment in the history of American public memory and ought to encourage scholars to cast their nets more broadly in the hunt for clues to how early Americans understood their relationship to the past.

As we have seen with Custis, that relationship was at least occasionally understood in the ancient language of objects and meaning. The story of Washington’s birthplace demonstrates that very old ideas about the function of historic objects persisted on this side of the Atlantic following European colonization of the New World and
evolved into the early republic and well beyond. Prime among those ideas is the impulse to bring one’s self into contact with historic objects. The search for Washington’s actual birth site—for the spot where visitors might touch the soil where Washington first breathed—is just one chapter in a much longer tale of object fetishism and pilgrimage. But that chapter has yet to end and it is my hope that this study has demonstrated that the medieval impulse remains strong and continues to shape the use of historic and historical objects at public history sites. Washington’s birthplace certainly will not be able to unbridle itself of the Memorial House’s mnemonic dominance until it recognizes that its own interpretive efforts reinforce visitors’ innate desires to see and touch the “real” thing.

Although an unenviable chore for staff at Washington’s birthplace, contending with the power of historic and historical objects should tantalize historians seeking new forays into the American past. Neither Marx nor Freud said all there is to say about the function of objects in history. Nor have semiotic, structuralist, or post-structuralist theories exhausted all avenues of critical object inquiry. Rather, new opportunities exist for those who are willing to observe the trajectory of historic objects through time and space while asking the simple question, “who wants to be close to these objects and why?” As we have seen at Wakefield, the purposeful manipulation of historic and historical objects has constituted—for over seventy-five years—the primary means to power for those who vie for historical authority. Moreover, varying decisions made regarding how to move objects, where to place them, and exactly how to go about being near them speak volumes about race, class, and gender difference. We have understood for a long time that humans negotiate their identifies through objects. What we have not yet quite accounted for, though, is what happens in that moment of physical contact.
immediacy—when humans touch, hold, or become enveloped within the object. Doing so need not just be the work of anthropologists; historians have plenty to gain as well.

Especially historians who are interested in plying their trade publicly. I hope that this study raises awareness of a problem that public historians are perhaps all too familiar with: people don’t pay enough attention to one another. Like the woman at the 1982 meeting of the NPS curator and the GWBMA’s furnishing committee, everyone involved with the production of public memory in this country—from visitors to site administrators—“just want to know what our role is.” At Washington’s birthplace, we have seen time and time again how two organizations devoted to roughly the same goals collided over basic misunderstandings of one another’s motivations. Sometimes those collisions owned to greed, self-interest, racism, and chauvinism. More frequently they were the results of failed communication and sheer incomprehension. Museums and other public history sites must devote themselves to the eradication of the first problem. The second, however, constitutes a stumbling block that historians of all stripes—within and without the academy—can work toward solving. Thinking critically about the uses and functions of objects is an important step in that direction.
FIGURE 1
THE NORTHERN NECK

Two maps showing the Northern Neck of Virginia. Both were generated by Google Maps (maps.google.com).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Two pieces of Washington relic or mourning jewelry. The pin enclosing Washington’s hair is on display at the Arlington House National Memorial in Virginia (photograph by author). The Washington mourning ring dates to 1800 and is from Ayres, “At Home with George,” 97.
Two views of the granite obelisk erected by the War Department in 1896 and prior to its relocation in 1930. The aerial photograph was taken in 1927. Note the location of the Hackberry Tree. GEWA.
Portrait of Josephine Wheelwright Rust, 1995, artist unknown. Currently on display at the Westmoreland County Museum and Library. GEWA.
FIGURE 9

INSPECTING WAKEFIELD

Top: Inspecting Wakefield, 28 March 1930. Second from left to right: H.P. Cammerer; Horace Albright, Washington Lewis, Charles Moore, Edward Donn, Josephine Rust (Photo. by Arno Cammerer). Bottom: Rust, Donn, Albright, Moore, and Washington at burial ground. GEWA.
FIGURE 10
THE WASHINGTON FAMILY BURIAL GROUND

Path to burial ground and FAC at burial ground, ca. 1932. GEWA.
The Westmoreland County Museum (above) is modeled after the Memorial House (below). Photograph of Museum by author. Photo of Memorial House, GEWA.
Conjectural 1896 drawing by John Stewart of the foundations discovered beneath the supposed site of Custis's first stone. Reproduced in Hatch, *Popes Creek Plantation*, 94.
"Wakefield VA. North side mon. looking east. Showing brick pillar found and oyster shell footing. April 20, 1926."

GEWA.
Three views of the Wakefield China. Photographs by Hilary Iris Lowe.
FIGURE 15
BUILDING X


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
FIGURE 16

MEMORIAL HOUSE COMMEMORATIVE TABLET

Memorial House with detail of commemorative tablet, ca. 1932. GEWA.
Exterior and interior views of the Log House, ca. 1932. GEWA.
FIGURE 18
MEMORIAL HOUSE FURNISHINGS

Top: The Memorial House with bearskin rug, ca. 1932. Bottom: The same room refurnished by Crowninshield, ca. 1936. GEWA.
Top: The WNMA sells plants from the second floor of the Memorial House. Below: The WNMA serves gingerbread and cider on Washington’s birthday. Dates unknown. GEWA.
FIGURE 20
WNMA GREENHOUSE

Top: Assembly instructions for greenhouse purchased by Crowninshield. Below: WNMA member in corn field with greenhouse in background, ca. 1952. GEWA.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Two views of the Memorial House basement with display cases and artifacts. Note dangerous stairs, ca. 1940. GEWA.
Following World War II, the Park hosted unprecedented numbers of middle-class families and returning military personnel. GEWA.
FIGURE 23

MAP OF WASHINGTON'S BIRTHPLACE, 1933

This map of the birthplace was given to visitors during the 1930s. GEWA.
FIGURE 24

APPROACHING THE MONUMENT

Two views of the approach to Washington’s birthplace, ca. 1933. GEWA.
FIGURE 25
SUPERINTENDENT HOUGH

Superintendent Phillip Hough leads a tour (above) and with his staff (below), ca. 1935. GEWA.
The Hackberry Tree in front of the Memorial House is thought to have been present at Washington's birth (photograph by author).
FIGURE 27

COLONIAL CROPS

Two views of Hough’s colonial crops and visitors (above), ca. 1935. GEWA.
1933 drawing of Hough's proposed colonial demonstration crops. Notice that the cotton patch is located closest to the Memorial House. Courtesy of Denver Service Center, Technical Information Center.
FIGURE 29
BUILDING X MARKED

Top: The foundations of Building X marked with young boxwoods, date unknown. Below: More recently the foundations have been marked with crushed oyster shell.
FIGURE 30

LIVING HISTORY AT WASHINGTON'S BIRTHPLACE

Top: A costumed interpreter demonstrates cooking in the Colonial Kitchen. Below: Ox demonstrations proved especially popular at the birthplace. GEWA.
Interpretive Specialist Dwight Storke (below) introduced puppet shows to the interpretive program during the 1970s. GEWA.
FIGURE 32
LIVING HISTORY TODAY

Top: Costumed and uniformed staff work side by side (photograph by author). Below: A typical scene at Washington's birthplace today. GEWA.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


———. “Living in the Past.” *American Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (Summer 1986).


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.


———. “Was Washington Born in a Cabin?” *Antiques* (February 1931).


Krugler, John D. "Behind the Public Presentations: Research and Scholarship at Living History Museums of Early America." *William and Mary Quarterly* Third Series 48 (July 1991).


Monthly Magazine 7 (1853).


Orosz, Joel J. *Curators and Culture: The Museum Movement in America, 1740-1870.*


Geographic Magazine 71, no. 4 (1937).


Wells, Camille. "Interior Designs: Room Furnishings and Historical Interpretations at Colonial Williamsburg." *Southern Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (Spring 1993).


VITA
Seth Charles Bruggeman

Seth Charles Bruggeman was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania on April 27, 1975. He graduated from Lower Dauphin High School in 1993. Seth Bruggeman received his B.A. with honors at The Pennsylvania State University in 1997 with degrees in History and American Studies. He received his M.A. degree at The College of William and Mary in 1999, with a concentration in American Studies, and his Ph.D. also from The College of William and Mary in American Studies in 2006.