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The president who opposed celebrating Washington's Birthday

This weekend, Alexandria celebrates George Washington's Birthday, including a parade and a dinner commemorating our first President's 1798 Birthnight Ball at Gadsby's City Tavern in Alexandria. While Washington's Birthday was celebrated throughout our young country, not just in his hometown, another First Family questioned the tradition. John and Abigail Adams, serving their country in its temporary capital of Philadelphia, both wrote of their opposition to the idolization of Adams' predecessor.

Why talk about Adams when this is about Washington's Birthnight Ball? Washington shook the political world when he chose not to run for a third term. He gave up power and headed home to his farm, run by his large, enslaved labor force. This passing of power was how it was supposed to work – the United States is now a Democratic Republic, where no one person holds all the power. Yet, when Washington retired, America couldn't quit him.

Remember the Birthnight Ball here in 1798? As his hometown, it would make sense to have a Birthnight Ball in Alexandria for our illustrious local retired hero. But Phila-



PHOTO/OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

A rendering of the George Washington Birthnight Ball.

delphia also held a Birthnight Ball in 1798. Who was the president then? John Adams. Do you think he was jazzed to see an event celebrating a retired president now a private citizen? He was invited to the Philadelphia ball but apparently sent back a terse message:

"Gentlemen, I have just received your polite invitation to a ball on Thursday the 22nd inst. and embrace the earliest opportunity of informing you that I decline accepting it."

Abigail had more words in a

letter to a friend:

"These Philadelphians are a strange set of people – they are about to celebrate, not the Birthday of the First Magistrate of the union as such, but of General Washington's Birthday.

The President of the united states to attend the celebration of the birthday in his public Character of a private Citizen! I do not know when my feelings of contempt have been more called forth... in my view[it] is ludicrous beyond compare."

Later Presidents Jefferson

and Madison also wrote about the awkwardness of the Birthnight Ball tradition. Perhaps we can ponder this conundrum of the new nation – as a democratic republic, do we honor people or institutions and values?

For more on this year's George Washington Birthday Parade, please visit <https://washingtonbirthday.com/>.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.