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Why did Washington have two birthdays?

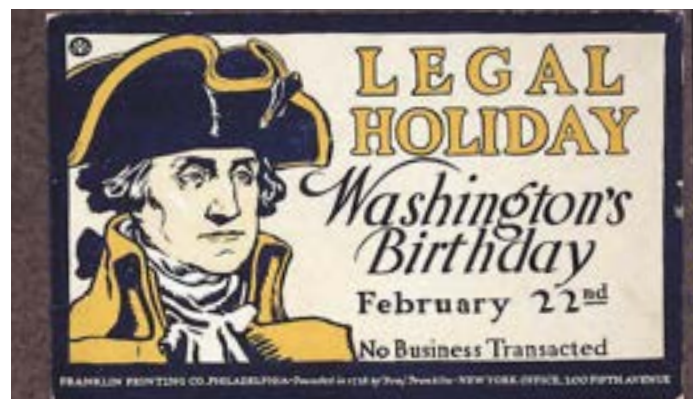
BY RACHEL BAYLER

For centuries, George Washington's birthday has traditionally been celebrated on Feb. 22. In 1879 and 1885, Congress designated that date as an official federal holiday, known as Washington's Birthday. In 1968, this holiday was shifted to the third Monday of each February and celebrated as Presidents Day. That aside, Feb. 22 is commemorated across the country as the birthday of our first commander in chief.

But what about George Washington's other birthday?

At first, this may seem a ridiculous question; no one has two birthdays. Yet, the Washington family Bible records George Washington's birthdate one year and 11 days earlier on Feb. 11, 1731. This is due to the Julian calendar, the primary system of dating used in the British Empire before 1752.

Implemented around 46 B.C. across Europe, the Julian calendar centered around a calculation that one year equaled 365 and one-quarter days. One day was added to the calendar every four years to account for the difference – the origin of the leap year. In the 16th century, mathematicians deduced that the Earth's cycle was around 11 minutes shorter than the original calculation and that the Julian calendar was over-corrected by about 10



PHOTOS/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Top: A painting commemorating George Washington. **Bottom:** A 'no service sign' for honoring George Washington's birthday.

days. This posed a problem for the church calendar, so a solution was sought.

In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII announced a new system that fixed the errors by altering the

leap year process and skipping forward 11 days. Though most Catholic countries adopted the new Gregorian calendar soon after 1582, many Protestant countries including England, resisted implementing it until the 18th century.

As part of the British Empire, the colony of Virginia did not adopt the Gregorian calendar until England did so in 1752. Under the new Gregorian calendar, Washington's birthdate jumped ahead one year and 11 days to Feb. 22, 1752.

Though a slight headache for historians, the differing dates of George Washington's birthday are fun bits of trivia to use at any related birthday celebrations held here in Washington's hometown.

Whether it is at the George Washington Birthday Parade on Feb. 15, at a local event on Presidents Day or the rededication of the Washington Statue at Memorial Hall on Feb. 22, there are plenty of opportunities in Alexandria to commemorate and honor the first President all month long.

Historic Alexandria encourages readers to check out the George Washington Birthday events this year at washingtonbirthday.com/2025-events.

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