



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

Origins of an Alexandria Tradition

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Image: George Washington, courtesy Gadsby's Tavern Museum.

Each February, the George Washington Birthnight Ball is held at Gadsby's Tavern Museum on the Saturday before President's Day. This popular event attracts attendees from all over the country and is one of the high points of the holiday weekend.

Birthnight balls originated in Britain to commemorate and celebrate the birthday of the monarch each year. In the American colonies, balls or dancing assemblies were held annually. Following victory in the Revolution, Americans continued this tradition. However, in the absence of a monarch, Americans turned to their closest figure, President George Washington.

The first public celebration of Washington's birthday was at Valley Forge during the winter of 1778 on Feb. 22. The *Virginia Gazette* referenced a ball in Williamsburg for Washington's birthday in its Feb. 26, 1779 issue. The *Virginia Herald and Fredericksburg Advertiser* printed on Feb. 19, 1780 that a birthday ball was held in Alexandria on Feb. 11 in honor of Washington's birthday.

It should be noted that the discrepancies between the birth date of Washington are due to differences in the Julian and Gregorian calendar. The British empire switched from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar in 1752. On the Julian calendar Washington was born on Feb. 11. The switch added eleven days to the calendar and therefore placed Washington's birth date on Feb. 22. Despite this modification, celebrations continued on Feb. 11 for many years.

The first known celebration of a Birthnight Ball at Gadsby's City Hotel was on Feb. 10, 1797. Washington was unfortunately not in attendance as he was in Philadelphia still serving as President. The notice placed in *The Times and Alexandria Advertiser* on Feb. 7, 1797 invited all "Ladies of Alexandria and its vicinity" as well as informed gentlemen where they could purchase tickets.

Additionally, the notice clarified why the ball was not on the traditional date of Feb. 11 — a religious conflict since the 11th fell on a Saturday and the ball would extend into Sunday.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

"Went with the family to Ball in Alexa. given by the Citizen[s] of it & its vicinity in commemoration of the Anniversary of my birth day." Feb. 12, 1798, The Diaries of George Washington.

Washington, enjoying his retirement years at Mount Vernon, traveled to Alexandria for the annual Birthnight Ball, held on Feb. 12. As with the 1797 celebration, the date was moved from the 11th due to the Sunday conflict. The Times and Alexandria Advertiser described the event in the Feb. 13, 1798 issue as being, "ushered in by a discharge of cannon." Washington and his company left Gadsby's for the Union Tavern, where they dined and offered a series of toasts.

That evening was documented by Martha's granddaughter Nellie Custis. She said in a letter to her friend:

"... I staid at home until the eleventh of February, when my Grandparents & self went up to Alexandria to attend the celebration of the Birth night. The room was crowded, there were twenty five or thirty couples in the two first setts...We danced until two o'clock, I went with Mrs. Potts to her house & sat up until five..."

In a later Out of the Attic, we will discuss the continuation of the Birthnight Ball tradition after Washington's passing.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.