



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

The Washington Birthnight Ball, for George in perpetuity

Alexandria Times, February 22, 2018

Image: George Washington Portrait, Office of Historic Alexandria.

Two notices were placed in *The Times and Alexandria Advertiser* on Feb. 9, 1799 detailing the upcoming activities for what would be the last Birthnight Ball George Washington would attend. Members of a civic organization were expected to meet at the Court House “to arrange matters for the celebration of Lieutenant General George Washington’s Birth-Day.”

The Ball at Gadsby’s, scheduled for Monday, Feb. 11, was advertised for “the gentlemen of Alexandria and its vicinity.” A committee of managers, unlike in past years, posted the advertisement. The appointment of a planning committee suggests that the tradition of celebrating Washington’s birth had taken root and would outlive Washington.

The Birthnight Ball did not end with the life of Washington. A local paper posted the following ad on Feb. 18, 1803:

The Gentlemen of Alexandria and its vicinity are respectfully informed, that an Assembly will be given at Gadsby’s Hotel, on the 22d instant, in commemoration of the Nativity of Washington.

Based on newspaper records from the 19th century, tavernkeepers of the city Hotel held the Birthnight Ball frequently through the 1830s, and occasionally through the 1860s, though it was held elsewhere in Alexandria through the Civil War.

There were times, however, when the celebration was canceled. For instance, in 1897, it was announced that there would be no public celebration of the birth of George Washington in the City of Alexandria that year. Due to the very difficult economic times, potential contributors to the celebration preferred that their funds be used instead to help the poor, and a large number of out-of-work firemen stressed that they did not have money for the appropriate “trimmings” associated with being in a proper parade.

In 1932, American Legion Post #22 celebrated the 200th anniversary of Washington’s birth by reenacting the 1799 Birthnight Ball at Gadsby’s. Although sporadically held for the next 44 years, in 1976 the annual tradition of the Birthnight Ball resumed after the legion donated the Museum to the City of Alexandria.



“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.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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