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Out of the Attic

The tradition of George Washington's Birthnight Ball

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Image: 'George Washington' eats his birthday cake at the 2018 Birthnight Ball.

Birthday parties are commonplace today, from a child's first to a beloved dog or cat's. However, in the 18th century, there was one birthday party that took this category of event to a whole other level – George Washington's. Or more specifically, the Birthnight Ball.

The Birthnight Ball originated in Britain to commemorate and celebrate the birthday of the monarch each year. This tradition continued in the newly freed United States, but with the absence of a monarch, Americans turned to the next closest figure, President George Washington. The first public celebration of Washington's birthday was at Valley Forge during the winter of 1778. 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.

Fast forward to Washington's retirement years and he celebrated his birthday at the City Tavern, now known as Gadsby's Tavern Museum, in 1798 and 1799. Dancing assemblies at this time were always an event, and Washington's was no exception. In 1798, the evening was documented by Martha's granddaughter Nellie Custis. She said in a letter to a 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..."





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

After Washington died in December 1799, the ball continued in his honor. In 1805, Lucinda Herbert, a granddaughter of John Carlyle, wrote the following description of a birthday ball in a letter to her sister Margaret:

“The Birth Night Ball supper was very elegant. A large cake in the center of the table ornamented with an equestrian statue of General Washington, the whole cover’d with a sugar candy net in the form of a cone on the top of which was the American Eagle. A variety of ornamented cakes, Sugar Baskets, Pyramids, West India fruit served on Glass gave a beautiful effect to the whole. There were eleven hundred persons at the City Ball, every room, and even the passages were fill’d with company.”

Gadsby’s Tavern Museum hosts the Birthday Banquet and Ball on the Saturday before President’s Day each February. This popular event attracts attendees from all over the country and quickly sells out. While it does not go until 2 a.m. as in Nellie’s day, it certainly does offer lots of dancing and a large cake.

“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.