

Celebrating at the Birthnight Ball

The Birthnight Ball 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, absent 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 on February 22. The *Virginia Gazette* referenced a ball in Williamsburg for Washington's birthday in its February 26, 1779 issue. The *Virginia Herald and Fredericksburg Advertiser* printed on February 19, 1780 that a birthday ball was held in Alexandria on February 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 February 11. The switch added eleven days to the calendar and therefore placed Washington's birth date on February 22. Despite this modification, celebrations continued on February 11 for many years.

The Birthnight Ball at Gadsby's

1797

The first known celebration of a Birthnight Ball at Gadsby's City Hotel was on February 10, 1797. Washington was not in attendance as he was in Philadelphia still serving as President. The notice placed in *The Times and Alexandria Advertiser* on February 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 February 11 - a religious conflict since the eleventh fell on a Saturday and organizers did not want the ball to extend into Sunday.

1798

"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."

February 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 February 12. As with the 1797 celebration, the date was moved from the eleventh due to the Sunday conflict. *The Times and Alexandria Advertiser* described the event in the February 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 sets... We danced until two o'clock, I went with Mrs. Potts to her house & sat up until five..."

1799

"Went up to Alexandria to the celebration of my birth day. Many manoeuvres were performed by the Uniform Corps and an elegant Ball & Supper at Night."

February 11, 1799, The Diaries of George Washington.

Two notices were placed in *The Times and Alexandria Advertiser* on February 9, 1799 detailing the upcoming activities for what would be the last Birthnight Ball Washington would attend. All "Silver Grays," a volunteer company of older residents, 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, February 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 after Washington

The Birthnight Ball did not end with the life of Washington. The Alexandria Gazette posted the following ad on February 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 nineteenth century, tavernkeepers of the City Hotel held the Birthnight Ball frequently through the 1830s, and occasionally through the 1860s. Others also hosted Birthnight Balls in Alexandria through the decades, but not who could claim Washington himself had attended.

In 1932, American Legion Post #24 celebrated the 200th anniversary of Washington's birth at Gadsby's by reenacting the 1799 Birthnight Ball. Although sporadically held for the next forty-four years, in 1976 the annual tradition of the Birthnight Ball resumed after the Legion donated the Museum to the City of Alexandria.

Gadsby's Tavern Museum and the Birthnight Ball

Every year the Birthnight Ball is held at Gadsby's Tavern Museum on the Saturday before President's Day each February. This popular event attracts attendees from all over the country and is the high point of the holiday weekend.