

Here, George Washington Was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument.* Seth C. Bruggeman. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008. 272 pp.

Reviewed by Scott E. Casper

At the George Washington Birthplace National Monument in Westmoreland County, Virginia, the most prominent structure is the 1931 “Memorial House,” built as a “replica” of the house where the Father of the Country was born. Nearby at the site, the excavation of another foundation belies any such claim. Once known as “Building X,” that foundation was backfilled twice in the 1930s; only in the 1970s did the National Park Service (NPS) label it the likely actual birthplace of Washington. The ongoing battle for authenticity, between the Memorial House and Building X and more broadly between different sorts of relics, provides the focus of Seth C. Bruggeman’s engaging analysis of a 20th century American shrine.

Bruggeman first encountered Washington’s birthplace as a graduate student when the NPS hired him to write the site’s administrative history. Unsatisfied by the constraints of that genre, he devised the dissertation that became this volume: a wide-ranging, historically and theoretically contextualized explication of the place’s significance not for the history of George Washington but for the history of 20th century historic preservation. The important meaning of the George Washington Birthplace National Monument, Bruggeman contends, lies in the tangled relationship between an organization of women, established in 1923 as the Wakefield National Memorial Association, and the NPS: a contest over “memory, ownership of the past, and the wonderfully slippery meaning of authenticity” (p. 6).

That history began more than a century earlier, when George Washington Parke Custis laid the first stone marker near the site in 1815. Motivated by post-War of 1812 patriotism and hero-worship of the step-grandfather who had raised him, Custis inherited a tradition of “object fetishism and pilgrimage” newly reinvigorated by the novels of Walter Scott and on display at places like Charles Willson Peale’s Philadelphia Museum (p. 35). By 1870 Custis’s stone was gone, having been moved several times and chipped away by relic-seekers. But it had stirred Americans’ imagination about Washington’s birthplace, the next marker of which was an obelisk erected in 1896 (and featured at today’s national monument).

The Wakefield National Memorial Association emerged in the context of the Colonial Revival, which Bruggeman argues was more than a vehicle for nostalgia. Women like Josephine Wheelwright Rust, who created the organization, were generally involved in Progressive-era reform movements as well as patriotic societies. The association raised money by 1926 to purchase 70 acres around the government’s 11-acre monument, and lobbied Congress successfully for permission to build its “replica” of Washington’s birth house even though nobody knew what the original had looked like. Because the NPS was expanding its own purview to historic as well as natural federal properties, authorization for the Memorial

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Association's construction came with a string attached: once the building was complete, the NPS would assume control of the site. Before the 1920s were out, the Memorial Association and the NPS had their first skirmishes, microcosms of competing conceptions of authenticity: one grounded in devotion to Washington and to women's roles in sustaining and commemorating him; the other, in the nascent, male-dominated profession of museum curatorship and preservation.

The discovery and first excavation of Building X exacerbated those tensions even before the Memorial House was completed. As Bruggeman notes, in the early 1930s historical archaeology was still a new field, its usefulness disputed by historians and some archaeologists. The Memorial Association and the NPS convinced themselves that they had found only an out-building and backfilled the archaeological remains. Four years later, using Civilian Conservation Corps laborers, the NPS re-excavated the site and came to believe that it had been the foundation of the actual Washington house, which looked nothing like the foundation of the Memorial House. The Memorial Association, however, insisted that its building was a replica, and the remains of Building X were backfilled again.

In the most theoretical discussion of the book, Bruggeman interprets the standoff between the Memorial House and Building X as emblematic of a larger conflict among three sorts of relics. "Indexical" relics, or "the 'real' thing..., failed miserably in the contest for authority at Washington's birthplace" (p. 115), whether the foundation of Building X or the archaeological artifacts that superintendent Phillip Hough sought in vain to foreground. "Symbolic" relics such as the Memorial House, which bore "no necessary relationship to their referents," fared better (p. 116). Eventually "iconic" relics, created to "reproduce as closely as possible the material realities of their referents," carried the day (p. 116). "Iconicity" triumphed not just at Washington's birthplace but also at the historic house museums established across the United States in the 1940s and 1950s.

Living history, the apogee of iconicity, also raised the specter of race relations in Jim Crow Virginia. As the NPS sought ways to segregate black and white visitors in the 1930s, Hough hired an elderly local African American to tend its surrounding farmland. "Uncle Annanias" Johnson quickly became another sort of relic, serving "the dual, though perhaps unwitting, purpose of interpreting slavery" (p. 156). At the same time, his presence "anticipated a new way of doing public history," pioneered in Scandinavian museums and at Colonial Williamsburg and reinforced by the turn to social history in the 1960s (p. 159). Predominant by 1970, living history appeared more authentic than any previous interpretive regime and pushed the problematic Memorial House away from center stage. But financial constraints in the 1980s, as well as growing awareness of the historical inaccuracies promulgated by costumed interpreters, led the NPS to scale back its living-history program. Meanwhile, local residents chafed at the NPS's land-acquisition policies and at a series of professional superintendents unacquainted with the vicinity. To this day, historians and rangers differ over the significance and interpretation of the site. "What we see today at Washington's birthplace," Bruggeman concludes, "is an unfinished commemorative project stymied by its own inability to make the past what it wanted it to be" (p. 200).

Thanks to his immersion at Washington's birthplace as well as in the documentary record, Bruggeman is a sure-footed guide through its politics of historic preservation. He deftly frames that history within several contexts: the centuries-old European commemoration of birthplaces and sacred sites more generally; the major stages of American historic preservation and the advent of historic archaeology; and broader developments such as the Cold War and Jim Crow. It might have been useful to consider how post-World War II changes at Washington's birthplace mirrored those occurring at other historic sites, because without such comparison it is difficult to evaluate Bruggeman's implication that Washington's birthplace was in the vanguard of living history.

At points in the book, tension between chronological and thematic presentation poses narrative and interpretive challenges. For example, Annanias Johnson's story appears not in the discussion of the 1930s (when he was employed at Washington's birthplace) but in the chapter on living history (dealing primarily with the post-World War II years), even though Bruggeman ultimately argues that Hough showcased him in order to divert attention from the earlier Memorial House-Building X controversy. Seen in his own moment, Johnson becomes less the precursor to later modes of reconstruction than an interpretive move common at southern plantation sites since the 1870s. His dual status as contemporary laborer and living relic was far from unusual: black men had served similar functions at Mount Vernon, Andrew Jackson's Hermitage, and other house museums since at least the 1890s, as well as at the southern resorts described by Nina Silber in *The Romance of Reunion* (1994).

Those caveats notwithstanding, Bruggeman has written a model study of how theoretical issues of historic preservation have unfolded in a particular place and time. Students of public history, as well as practitioners at historic sites and professionals in cultural resource management, should find *Here, George Washington Was Born* an illuminating guide to the larger issues at stake in local debates over authenticity and meaning.

Reference Cited

Silber, Nina

1994 *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

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