

Celebrating George Washington

The statement that George Washington was born on February 22, 1732 is not entirely correct. It has to do with the calendar switchover twenty years later. According to the Julian calendar in use by the British Empire, Mr. Washington was born on February 11, 1731. The modern Gregorian calendar had been adopted by the rest of the world in 1582 so by the time of Washington's birth, England and its colonies on the Julian calendar were eleven days behind the Gregorian one because of eleven leap years. And because England began its official year on March 25 instead of January 1, Washington's February birthday belonged in the earlier year, 1731.

The first celebration of Washington's birthday was at Valley Forge in 1778. Six years later a group of men gathered in New York City for dinner and speeches in Washington's honor. This became a yearly event even though Washington himself had concerns about the celebrations becoming too political so by 1793 they ceased. After Washington's death in 1799 Congress adopted a resolution to observe February 22 throughout the country as a day to express popular esteem for the first president. By the 1832 centennial of his birth the day was observed with orations and toasts and grand balls.

On February 22, 1822 the small community on the banks of the Genesee River held a celebration at Oliver Culver's ballroom on East Avenue in Brighton in commemoration of Washington's 90th birthday. Six local businessmen sent out simple pasteboard invitations on Friday, February 15, for the event a week later. The "Miss Hanford" on the invitation (pictured) was Charlotte Hanford of Kortright, New York, who was in town to visit her brother, George, a coach maker on State Street.

Officially, Washington's birthday became a federal holiday for government offices on January 31, 1879. In 1896 the U.S. Senate began the tradition of a member reading aloud Washington's Farewell Address on February 22.

On February 10, 1971, President Nixon issued an executive order creating the Uniform Monday Holiday Act, providing more three-day weekends for workers. Presidents Day, on the third Monday in February, is intended to commemorate both George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. The latter's birthday is February 12. Neither the 12th nor the 22nd will ever land on the third Monday of the month.

Locally, George Washington's name lives on in street names as well as a unique area – Washington Grove. Annexed by the city in 1905 along with the village of Brighton, Cobb's Hill Woods became Washington Grove in 1932 to celebrate the bicentennial of Washington's birth. The twenty-six acre site on the east side of the hill bears a plaque saying "This area...dedicated to the memory of George Washington and to be known as the Washington Grove is being reforested and developed by the school children of Rochester under the direction of the Bureau of Parks." To that end annual tree plantings took place on Arbor Day beginning with sixty sugar maples in 1933.

Today the Friends of Washington Grove, with the city of Rochester, are working to eliminate invasive plants and reintroduce native species. The park can be accessed at the end of Nunda Boulevard and at the meadows near the top of Reservoir Road.

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