

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Seth C. Bruggeman. *Here, George Washington Was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008. xi + 260 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-3177-5; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-3178-2.

Reviewed by Alexandra Lord (National Park Service)

Published on H-South (October, 2011)

Commissioned by Catherine A. Cardno



In the wake of the War of 1812, Americans came to accept both a collective identity and a shared past. Reflecting the desire to celebrate and commemorate this shared past, George Washington Parke Custis traveled with two friends to Popes Creek, the birthplace of Custis's step-grandfather, George Washington. Although the Washingtons' family house no longer existed, Custis and his friends marked the spot they believed to be Washington's birthplace with a stone marker. In the nearly two centuries that followed Custis's trip, additional layers of interpretation and markers replaced that first stone as the site grew in importance to the nation.

Seth C. Bruggeman's engrossing study of the George Washington Birthplace National Monument unpeels these layers, providing a provocative look at how and why Americans care about birthplaces and commemorative sites. Although *Here, George Washington Was Born* began life as an administrative history of the 550-acre National Park Service Washington Birthplace, Bruggeman has rejected the heavily rigid structure common in most administrative park histories, presenting instead a lively narrative that explores the conflicts inherent in the development and interpretation of commemorative sites, particularly birthplaces. In the process, Bruggeman also provides insights into how shifting views of race and gender have shaped Americans' understanding of this and other important historic sites.

Sites, such as the George Washington Birthplace, have always made historians uneasy. Not only has it been difficult, given Washington's own reticence about his personal life, to sort fact from fiction when interpreting the story of Washington here or at Mount Vernon,

it has also been difficult to determine the significance of birthplaces overall. After all, Washington spent only the first three years of his life at Popes Creek and there is no indication that the site held any special meaning for him. Bruggeman points out, however, that, as early as the seventeenth century, commemorations of birthplaces were fostering the development of heritage tourism in Europe. In America, commemoration of these sites "has been particularly useful toward sustaining the long-standing notion ... that the nation's unique environment has fostered a similarly unique citizenry" (p. 14).

Tourists and site visitors have flocked to the George Washington Birthplace and other similar sites out of the belief that these places provide an opportunity to learn about or venerate an individual. However, as historians know, such sites as this one have the potential to reflect a much more complicated past, one that may tell us less about the life of Washington and more about our attempts to define and understand ourselves through history. Popes Creek is an especially important place to tell this type of layered history as Washington's significant role has made the site a place of unofficial and official veneration for over a hundred years. Given its status as a birthplace, the Washington Birthplace also provides insights into shifting perceptions of motherhood and women's status. And, of course, the site forces an investigation of Washington's relationship with slavery as well as the National Park Service's reluctance to confront the ugly realities of slavery in telling Washington's story and the almost constant exclusion of African Americans from participation in the public commemoration of Washington. Bruggeman illustrates the depth and complexity of this racism through stories in which African

American visitors were turned away from fear of “complaints from white visitors” to the heavily paternalistic relationship between the park’s superintendent and “Uncle Annanias,” an African American farmer who provided “local color and interest” at the site (pp. 153, 157).

Bruggeman’s book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter explores the informal attempts to commemorate Washington. Dominated by the actions of Custis, a reenactor and a fervent admirer of Washington, these efforts reflected both the romanticism of the period as well as an early attempt to create and establish American memory. Chapter 2, which focuses on the emergence of the colonial revival, explores the tensions between the female-dominated Wakefield National Memorial Association (the organization created to preserve and promote Popes Creek) and the male-dominated National Park Service. Chapter 3 focuses on the discovery, excavation, and backfilling of the foundations of the Washington house. This chapter highlights the fledgling development of the field of historic archeology and the contested meaning of the Memorial House (a house that was built in 1930 and that adherents embraced as a replica of the Washington house—although no one involved in its construction had ever seen the original). In chapter 4, Bruggeman expands on his analysis of the debates surrounding the Memorial House. Chapter 5 places this Birthplace National Monument within the context of the socioeconomic upheaval of the 1950s and 1960s, exploring the complexity of the National Park Service’s often racist approach to the site, which entailed recognizing and following “local laws and customs regarding segregation” (p. 154). In his final chapter, Bruggeman documents how the complexity of these overlapping and often confused approaches has

caused problems for both site visitors and the National Park Service.

Pointing out that “no other organization, the academy included, plays a more important role in shaping how our nation’s history is understood” than the National Park Service, Bruggeman places the efforts of the National Park Service front and center in his work (p. 6). But Bruggeman also highlights and discusses the important roles that women’s organizations played in promoting historic sites and historic house museums. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, historic organizations, such as the Mount Vernon Ladies Association and the Wakefield National Memorial Association, were composed of prominent and politically active women who fostered and promoted a specific vision of the nation’s past. While these women’s organizations were pushed to the side by professional male historians and preservationists during the 1920s, the emphasis these women had placed on telling domestic stories and stories that promoted the ideal of motherhood lingered and continued to shape many of the nation’s most prominent historic sites throughout much of the twentieth century in both direct and indirect ways.

*Here, George Washington was Born* is a must read for historians of preservation as well as curators, but it is also a work that should be read by historians within the academy. Bruggeman provides important insights into the difficulties in preserving and interpreting sites for nonhistorians, and, more important, in ensuring that the history which reaches the general public is complex and reflects the nuances we have come to expect in academic history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-south>

**Citation:** Alexandra Lord. Review of Bruggeman, Seth C., *Here, George Washington Was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. October, 2011.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25489>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.