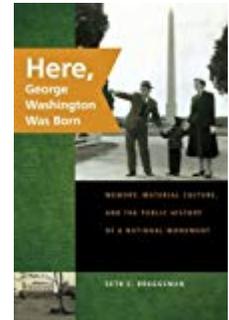


**Seth C. Bruggeman.** *Here, George Washington Was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008. xi + 260 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8203-3178-2.



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**Published on** H-Nationalism (October, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Paul Quigley (University of Edinburgh)

“Here, in the peace and beauty of this place untouched by time, the staunch character of our hero comes to the imagination.” So says the National Park Service’s (NPS) online brochure for Wakefield, the George Washington Birthplace National Monument, in the Northern Neck district of Virginia. Seth C. Bruggeman’s carefully researched new book is, in effect, an extended refutation of this pastoral myth of an “untouched” land steeped in heroic memory. *Here, George Washington Was Born* not only describes the massive transformations to Wakefield wrought over the past two centuries, but also seeks to explain what these repeated interventions tell us about the changing meanings of the site and the larger history of commemoration in the United States. The resulting history is a fascinating, if cautionary, tale that will appeal particularly to public historians and students of American memory from various disciplines.

Bruggeman’s story begins in the early nineteenth century when Washington’s adopted son George Washington Parke Custis placed a stone

marker at the site amid the ruins of an old chimney, supposedly the remains of the house where the founding father had been born (and lived until the age of three, when the family moved up the Potomac River). The stone and the chimney eventually disappeared, probably the victim of relic hunters. Toward the end of the century, the federal government, under the auspices of the War Department, acquired the property and erected an obelisk to replace the old Custis stone, a miniaturized version of the Washington Monument in the nation’s capital.

In the twentieth century, the story becomes far more complicated. An association of elite white women formed, with the objective of erecting a “replica” of the house in which Washington was born, at the site of the obelisk, which was then demoted in status and relocated to an entrance road into the property. The “birthplace” was completed and transferred to the jurisdiction of the National Park Service in time for Washington’s bicentennial in 1932. The “replica,” of course, was more a colonial revival fantasy than

an authentic reconstruction; no pictorial evidence of the original house survives and the written inventories of its contents date to several decades after Washington's time there. Indeed, NPS archaeologists soon enough found the underground remains, several hundred feet away, of a structure quite different in plan that is more likely to have been the Washington family home. This discovery set off a series of crises in management and interpretation, which have still not been entirely resolved.

At times the story can read almost like a comic novel, but Bruggeman is concerned to draw out the larger significance of these transformations and the internal bureaucratic struggles that accompanied them. Despite its location off the beaten track, Wakefield played an important role in many of the past century's most important developments in heritage preservation, including the evolution of women's patriotic associations, the rise of historical archaeology, and the adoption of living history. Central to all these developments, Bruggeman argues, were persistent questions about audience, meaning, and authenticity.

While a major part of the book concerns the administrative history of the site under the direction of the NPS, Bruggeman frames that history within a set of larger contexts. He is particularly interested in the long history of "object fetishism," especially in the Christian traditions of saints' relics and pilgrimages to holy sites. Bruggeman sees the secular birthplace phenomenon as a residue of these medieval spiritual practices. The question of who has access to and control over these potent objects is thus an age-old question of power and representation. At the same time, the survival of these practices of worship into an increasingly professionalized and "scientific" discipline of history raises problems and paradoxes for the bureaucrats who are charged with managing "sacred" sites and relics.

Over the past century, Wakefield has been a collection of various kinds of objects competing

with one another for authenticity. The women who furnished the faux "replica" filled it with high-style colonial era furniture bought on the antiques market, while the NPS superintendent of the site fought to exhibit—in the house's damp basement—a ragtag collection of arrowheads and pottery shards found onsite in archaeological digs, which, in his view, had special significance because Washington might actually have seen or used them. Bruggeman usefully sorts these competing objects into semiotic categories—index, icon, and symbol—according to the system laid out by philosopher Charles Peirce.

But Bruggeman's narrative makes clear that, off and on, the NPS tried to sidestep the nagging questions about authenticity by shifting attention from the memorial house and its objects to the site itself, the landscape in which Washington was supposedly born and raised (up to the age of three!). From an early date the managers of Wakefield set up a "living farm" along colonial lines, and even hired an elderly black man, apparently born a slave near the Wakefield property, to work eighteenth-century crops like tobacco. Later, the NPS installed a comprehensive program of living history on the farm, one of the first in the park system. Until the 1990s, this program did not openly deal with the issue of slavery. Instead the birthplace tried to create an idyllic plantation environment supposedly "untouched by time" that would somehow conjure the memory of Washington, primarily for the benefit of a white tourist audience that might also take in Robert E. Lee's birthplace just a few miles down the road.

While Bruggeman throws light on the issues of race, class, and gender at stake in these regimes of preservation and interpretation, his analysis would have benefited from a somewhat stronger emphasis on the core issue of landscape. Although "object fetishism" certainly plays a crucial role at Wakefield, the significance of the birthplace—from the moment Custis installed the first memorial stone there—has depended even more on the au-

thenticity of the landscape itself. Yet that landscape arguably is no more authentic than the faux “memorial house,” since subsequent generations of owners, most notably the NPS itself, have so dramatically altered it. The idea of a landscape “untouched by time” is transparently antihistorical. It would be interesting to hear more of Bruggeman’s thoughts on the persistence of this rhetoric in NPS interpretation, which has been a constant from 1940 to the present, despite all the changes in administration and bureaucratic philosophy.

In a final section, Bruggeman offers some interesting, if brief, remarks on his own role in this saga as a consultant to the NPS trying to determine what new role the birthplace should play in the future. He tells the story of how he was met with awkward silence at a conference when he pressed the audience to consider the possibility that Washington might not even have been born at the site. His own suggestion, following the lead of some of the NPS’s own historians, would be to expand the interpretation of the site to encompass its role in the history of the colonial revival and heritage preservation. But transforming the birthplace into a “meta-landscape” (my term, not his) is a hard sell for visitors who come to the site hoping to channel the spirit of Washington.

Ultimately the tale is a sobering one for public historians. It is not at all clear what the site teaches us about Washington or his time. If the birthplace tells us more about the history of commemorative regimes in the twentieth century than it does about the eighteenth century, what is the continuing rationale for its existence? But, of course, the same might be said of any commemorative monument, to a greater or lesser degree. The conundrum of Washington’s birthplace is the conundrum of commemoration itself.

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**Citation:** Kirk Savage. Review of Bruggeman, Seth C. *Here, George Washington Was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. October, 2009.

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