

A Postcard to Commemorate George Washington's Birthday

By Juliette Wood

Among the Archives and Collections of the Folklore Society is a large postcard album given by Mrs Barbara Aitken (née Freire-Marreco) who was an active member of the Society at the beginning of the twentieth century. One of her main interests was American culture and this album contains postcards of Native American subjects, especially the tribes of the Southwest, and colonial America. An entire section is devoted to Mount Vernon, Virginia, the home of America's first president, George Washington. Among the views of the house and its rooms is a postcard commemorating the birthday of America's first president on 22 February.

Washington's Birthday is one of the oldest federal holidays celebrated in the United States. The Congress of the United States implemented the federal holiday in 1885 to be celebrated on Washington's actual birthday, 22 February. In 1971 this and other federal holidays were shifted to the nearest Monday. Since Abraham Lincoln's birthday and Martin Luther King Day also occur in February, there has been a move to consolidate the two presidential holidays into a single President's Day observance commemorating all the presidents of the United States. Even congressionally enacted holidays develop a traditional life of their own, however, and many States continue to observe both Washington's and Lincoln's birthday as separate events.

The exaltation of George Washington as "The Father of His Country" began soon after his death. His myth received a boost with the publication of *A History of the Life and Death, Virtues and Exploits of General George Washington*, by Mason Locke Weems (a.k.a. Parson Weems), first published in 1800 and then in 1809. This biography includes the famous tale of the boy who used his new hatchet to chop down his father's cherry tree and then confessed, "I cannot tell a lie, I did it with my little hatchet." Any folklorist will recognise the emerging pattern of heroic biography and the way in which legend is fitted into such a context in Weems' account. The author cites "an excellent lady," "cousin" to the great man, as his source. The anecdote casts Washington in the mould of "a hero and a demigod," an honest Enlightenment figure who would inspire generations of American children.

Earlier celebrations of the holiday included parades and pageants, the latter often extolling the local history of the town as much as the national narrative of the founding fathers. The town of Eustis in Florida has staged a "George Fest" since 1902, about the same time that this postcard was printed. Other locations that proudly proclaim their pedigree are Laredo, Texas where celebrations go back to 1898 and Alexandria, Virginia which has staged a parade since the 1920s. With the rise in popularity of re-enactment groups, pageants are becoming popular once again and many new ones are being established. Notions of authenticity and revival are important in understanding these celebrations. Balls in colonial costume and dinners of colonial themed food are increasing. Inns and houses claim an association with Washington the General with the phrase "Washington slept here." A man leading an army in a long war would naturally move from place to place and many of the "sleeping" associations are no doubt real. Just as many fall into the same category as Weems' anecdotes. This well known motif was used as a frame for a Moss Hart and

George S. Kaufman comedy built around the misadventures of an urban couple who move to the country (*George Washington Slept Here*) (1940s).

Commerce is an integral part of contemporary festival. Many businesses and schools now close and, especially since the holiday was moved to the Monday, many shops hold “George Washington Day” sales. If George Washington’s destruction of a cherry tree came to symbolize American honesty, then the cherry tree itself, or rather its fruit, became a favourite food associated with his birthday. Baked goods with cherries, such as cherry pie, and other sweet foods with cherries or cherry motifs, play a part in the commercial celebration of the holiday. Cakes shaped like logs, with chocolate frosting to represent the bark decorated with a small cardboard or plastic hatchet and a cherry motif are particular popular. Much the same cake is sold on Lincoln’s birthday, which is celebrated ten days earlier on 12 February. Minus the hatchet and cherry, it serves to represent the log cabin in which Lincoln was born.

Memorabilia also commemorate the day and postcards, such as the one in the Folklore Society collection, are perhaps the oldest memorabilia associated with Washington’s Birthday. The postcard reproduced here is relatively plain. Earlier postcards depict Washington crossing the Delaware or occasionally allude to Valley Forge, but it is the action of the young Washington expressed in Parson Weems’ apocryphal legend narrative that has come to represent the day.

Bibliography

George Washington Slept Here: Colonial Revivals and American Culture, 1876-1980, by Karen Ann Marling (Harvard University Press, 1988).

All around the Year: Holiday and Celebrations in American Life, by Jack Santino (Illinois University Press, 1994).