

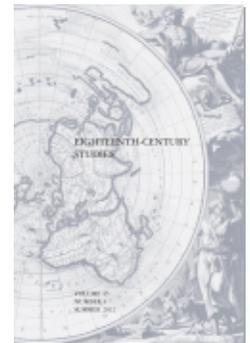


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"His High Mightiness": History, Memory, and the Politics of
Remembering George Washington

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“His High Mightiness”: History, Memory, and the Politics of Remembering George Washington

Gerald E. Kahler, *The Long Farewell: Americans Mourn the Death of George Washington* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008). Pp. 190. \$30.00.

Seth C. Bruggeman, *Here, George Was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of A National Monument* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008). Pp. 260. \$24.95.

History, Pierre Nora writes in “Between History and Memory: Les Lieux de Memoire,” is an objective enterprise. It is a contrivance. At best, it is or it seeks as its most sacred goal an unbiased truth. At worst, it is a construction. History remakes what we now call the past or yesterday into a series of colorful mini-dramas in which cantankerous, divided factions (who change over time and space) drive the narrative up and down, to and fro. In contrast, memory is unapologetically subjective. It is deeply flawed. It is racist, sexist, class oriented; it is an ethnocentric thing. Perhaps because of its nuance, its muddiness, memory, Nora insists, is destroyed by history because history is a less complicated endeavor. At the middle of that ensuing conflict are Gerald Kahler’s *The Long Farewell* and Seth Bruggeman’s *Here, George Was Born*.

Drawing on almost three hundred funeral eulogies published throughout the country between 1799 and 1800, *The Long Farewell* recounts in vivid detail the story of a nation mourning the death of its “First Citizen,” George Washington. As news of the beloved leader’s demise appeared in newspapers across the then young Republic, Americans from every walk of life—from his close friend Alexander Hamilton, to Congregational minister and Jeffersonian Republican the Reverend Dr. William Bentley, to the Reverend Richard Allen, a founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in America—paused in unison to honor the passing of America’s first President. *The Long Farewell*, Kahler explains, “retrieves an unfamiliar and long-forgotten story from the annals of the early history of the American republic . . . It narrates the prolonged national mourning rituals for George Washington that moved thousands of grieving Americans to tears and dominated American civil life for sixty-nine days during the winter of 1799–1800” (10). For several days, throughout the country commerce was suspended, shops and offices closed, and theater performances and assemblies postponed.

By Kahler’s account, while many in the nation participated in funeral processions and memorial services, wore black badges of mourning, composed eulogies and orations, poems and hymns, wrote letters to the editors who ran newspapers around the country, Federalists used Washington’s death “and the commemorations that followed as a means of unification in a nation that was precariously divided by the political struggles of the Federalists and Democratic Republicans” (26). If but for a brief moment, Americans were one people again, united in their grief at the passing of the “first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen” (33). Just a few days after the state funeral for Washington, a unanimous Congress approved a proposal to extend the mourning period. Alexander Hamilton unsuccessfully attempted to use the national event, which included a series of

mock funerals, to advance his own personal and political agendas (38–54). But, he was not alone in doing so; though “Washington gave only limited evidence in his life of conventional Christian faith,” clergymen throughout the republic used their sermons and eulogies to ignite in the nation a renewed sense of Christian zeal and revival (59–61). The national mourning period also afforded women, perhaps most notably Abigail Adams, an opportunity to advance their causes as well. From beginning to end, they were significant actors in the nationwide funeral processions. According to Kahler, “the national mourning played a key role in advancing the new ideal of ‘Republican Motherhood,’ giving women a civic role through their enhanced performance of a traditional duty” (81).

Overlooked in this fascinating account is an explication of George Washington’s will that appeared in print in many northern newspapers. Specifically, Kahler does not address Washington’s freeing of and provisions for William Lee and his other slaves in his last will and testament. “First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen,” George Washington was also the first Founding Father to free his slaves. While Richard Allen urged African Americans to join in the mourning, Kahler makes nothing of the Father of His Country and his slaves, and how northern newspapermen clearly politicized his last will and testament (11).

While Kahler’s *The Last Farewell* attempts to uncover several unheralded histories around Washington’s death, Seth Bruggeman’s *Here, George Was Born* is caught up in a succession of crashing and receding waves of memory. The story behind Washington’s birthplace, he explains, is neither a story about George Washington nor necessarily one about the commemoration of his birth; instead it is about how and what we choose to remember and why those choices change over time (9). This complicated story begins with George Washington Parke Custis, the adopted son of George and Martha Washington, who some time in 1815 or 1816 placed a stone marker among the remains of a house in which he believed the Father of His Country was born (24–26). Though the ruins would disappear with time, the federal government later expressed new interest in the birthplace of the first President of the United States. “The Birthplace,” Bruggeman explains, “languished through Reconstruction until 1879 when Congress, eager to facilitate sectional reunion, appropriated \$3,000 to survey the site” (52). In 1893, Congress erected a new marker to supplant the memorial placed by Washington’s adopted son.

The government’s efforts to preserve the site were followed up during the 1930s by a group of philanthropic women led by Josephine Wheelwright Rust. With little to no historical evidence, Rust and the Wakefield National Memorial Association used their influence and fundraising skills to build a replica of the house of Washington’s birth as they believed it had looked (64–65). What’s more, Rust—an admirer of Washington and a force to be reckoned with in her own right—gave part of her own wealth to build and furnish the house that stood at a distance from the “fifty-foot granite obelisk atop the birth site” (42–53). Not surprisingly, the replica of Washington’s house was more a work of fiction than of fact. Indeed, by the middle of the 1930s, archaeologists working with the National Park Service unearthed the footprint of the actual house near the replica home. The discovery created a series of conflicts over how the birthplace should be managed and interpreted.

By Bruggeman’s account, these conflicts have yet to be fully resolved. Quite the contrary: his institutional history of Washington’s birth reveals a complex story of how different generations of Americans have tried to claim from the vestiges of time and memory a legacy of the country’s Founding Father. But as Bruggeman’s

narrative demonstrates, history and memory are at odds with one another, largely because the best intentions of the various actors who sought to define the site preserved not so much Washington's particular moment in time, as an interesting and nuanced record of their own. In bringing these varied yet interlocked stories to light, Bruggeman has made a significant contribution to the study of the multifarious politics of history, memory, and public history.

Taken together, both Kahler's *The Last Farewell* and Bruggeman's *Here, George Was Born* remind us that history is an unusual, perhaps even an unnatural thing. Forever tethered to memory, the pursuit of the past reveals itself as a constant struggle in which we try to sort out the fragments of memory, both past and present. But perhaps dance offers us a better analogy of the complex politics of history and memory. Like the minuets George Washington fancied in his day, the two dance artfully, leading and then following one another. Rather than replace—or, as Nora would have us believe, destroy—one another, history and memory need each other, for without the one, the other cannot exist. Indeed, if these histories of George Washington tell us anything, it is that the truth about the past more than likely lies somewhere in the middle, caught between history and memory. In short, the true story of “His Mightiness”—that is, if there is such a thing as an absolute truth—is a subject for neither history nor memory alone, but for both.