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Resource Stewardship and Community Engagement at George Washington Birthplace National Monument

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The National Park Service (NPS) Northeast Region, in partnership with National Capital Region and the Conservation Fund, has developed a process using the gateway community model to address park and community partnerships in the critical area of responding to the pressures of urbanization that frequently affect park resources and visitor experiences. The fund's gateway model presents the Northeast Region with an opportunity to adapt an existing approach in the development of civic engagement strategies that will have demonstrable, long-term benefits to the park and the community it interacts with—now and into the future. This case study describes how the model is being applied to George Washington Birthplace National Monument, a park that is initiating the preparation of a general management plan (GMP), and one of five parks in the National Capital and Northeast Regions that are involved in the pilot program. The term “community partnership” replaces the term “gateway” in the Northeast Region, at the request of the three parks involved in the project.

George Washington Birthplace is in the path of the next generation of growth evolving from the nearby and rapidly exurbanizing Interstate 95 corridor between Washington, D.C., and Richmond, Virginia. The park has a unique opportunity to begin the community dialogue at a time when it can be focused on planning for the benefit of both the community and the park. This case study will introduce the community partnership project at the park as an approach to civic engagement within the planning process for the park's GMP, which is in its early phases. The case study will describe the sequence of project activities, the centerpiece of which is a day-long workshop, and the community profile, a data product that will play a role in establishing the context for planning and for park–community engagement.

The partnership project is one of three civic engagement initiatives designed as outreach to improve interactions with the community during the GMP planning project.

- The *Scholars Roundtable* will bring together historians and resource professionals to present and deliberate current scholarship and resource information on the park. The discussion will inform a revision of park purpose and significance, a building block of the planning process. It affords an opportunity for an invited audience to take part in discussions that will influence the development of the plan.
- In the *Preserving Memory Seminar*, scholars will guide park staff and others in developing a better understanding of a largely untold story, that of slavery on the Washington family plantation, and in meeting the challenges of interpreting this aspect of plantation life.

- The *Community Partnership Workshop* is the third initiative.

Four steps in the Community Partnership Project

1. The centerpiece of the project is a workshop (held on April 12, 2005), when some 55 people—community leaders, local officials, agency representatives, and others who have a special interest in the park, along with park staff—took part in a community partnership workshop facilitated by the Conservation Fund to discuss the park’s connections to the larger community, the interests and resources shared by the park and community, and areas for future collaboration. Ed McMahon, a nationally recognized conservation leader, was the principal speaker at the workshop. His previous involvement with Northern Neck activities has sparked local interest for a balanced approach to managed growth and conservation—a key factor to community “buy in.”
2. While the workshop focus is on discussion and dialogue with community representatives, there will be presentations intended to build an awareness of shared community and park interests. This presentation will introduce the George Washington Birthplace *community profile*, a digital data product focused on regional land use trends and an assessment of significant natural and cultural resources.
3. The Conservation Fund staff has guided *workshop planning*. The staff suggested at the beginning that the park bring in selected partners to plan the workshop. The partners are representatives of the Northern Neck Planning District Commission, Westmoreland County government (the county the park is located in), and the Northern Neck Tourism Council. Through an initial scoping session and subsequent conference calls, Conservation Fund staff have worked with park and regional NPS and the community partners in developing the agenda, determining workshop objectives, and identifying the list of potential participants. The partners have also co-signed the letter of invitation to the workshop indicating the extent of community interest.
4. The workshop outcomes (referenced in step 1) will almost certainly lay the groundwork for collaborative relationships between the park and the community. It is also expected that some ideas for further activities will emerge (not only between the park and the community but among different interests in the community). While the partnership pilot project for the park ends at this point, the GMP will be moving forward. The pilot project merges into the planning effort with the public involvement program, providing an opportunity to build on workshop outcomes.

Issues of the park and region

George Washington Birthplace is set in Virginia’s Northern Neck and Westmoreland County and shares a relationship of enduring historic value. The county’s historic atmosphere is sustained by the presence of the birthplaces of Washington, James Monroe and Robert E. Lee; nine other nationally or state recognized sites of historic significance, and a continuing rural, agricultural landscape.

Currently the nearby lands are either farms, forests, or wetlands. These uses are consistent with the historical associations of the park and enhance its commemoration of George Washington. Adjacent inappropriate land and waterfront development could dramatically

alter this critical rural historic scene.

From the perspective of park managers, key concerns that extend outside the park boundary are preserving the cultural landscape, protecting water resources, and enhancing the visitor experience. Possible problems include:

- Potential new housing developments and associated infrastructure outside the boundaries places increasing pressure on these fragile resources.
- Development trends in the region may equally threaten viewsheds and related resources in the approach to the park and in the park's surroundings.
- Degradation of views and quiet serenity will diminish the historical environs and the visitor experience.

Other considerations include:

- Water and other natural resources in the park remain relatively pristine. These unspoiled resources are the result of efforts focused on the preservation of the historical setting at this location and limited development bordering the park.
- Popes Creek estuary, encompassed by much of the park, has high research and scientific value due to water quality and habitat.
- Congressional intent upon establishing this national monument was to preserve the site in order to allow visitors to appreciate the natural world and experiences of George Washington's boyhood.

Building resource stewardship through civic engagement

It is clear in a region poised on the brink of change, such as the Northern Neck of Virginia, that the protection and management of significant resource values must be considered in a context broader than the confines of the park boundary. Further, this context should consider the interrelationships of functioning landscapes and the effects of local governance. In accordance with NPS management policies, George Washington Birthplace must be managed to protect and sustain the cultural and natural values intrinsic to the place. In protecting the integrity of "place," however, the park must be managed in a regional context, so that it can positively influence the decisions and subsequent actions occurring beyond its boundaries that would otherwise diminish the value of park resources or the experience of visitors. In its day-to-day management, the park can seek to involve the greater community in building a sense of ownership among citizens and instilling a stewardship ethic throughout the community. In addition to community stewardship, park managers can influence the management of surrounding environmental and cultural resources as well as those decisions that could affect the future of these resources—ideally through a framework for collaborative decision-making.

Gaining a regional perspective can help to inform park staff about activities that could affect park resources or influence management and identify opportunities for joint actions that could benefit both the park and the region. By working collaboratively, citizens, stakeholders, and local leaders can define important resources and shared assets of the region,

address actions posing a threat to these values, and work together to realize a shared future by building on available opportunities. The community partnership workshop began this important community dialogue to support future collaborative efforts. It introduced citizens, stakeholders, and local leaders to some of the values and significant resources of the park and the surrounding region through the community profile and related resource assessment. The profile informs the park of the regional perspective, and, for those in the community, how the park relates to the region. It is a tool to illustrate the resources and assets shared by the region and the park, the issues and opportunities facing both, and, ultimately, a framework to guide participants toward shared goals for the region's future.

The community profile is intended to help establish the groundwork for collaborative relationships between the park and the community: it describes the region and its resources, defines indicators of landscape function, and identifies trends and local decisions influencing future change. Describing the regional context in terms of landscape function, resource value, and anticipated future change will enable citizens, stakeholders, and local leaders to gain insights into how resource protection can be balanced with managed growth. Factors affecting future park management can be evaluated against this description of the regional context, and challenges transformed into opportunities for a shared future. This context is comprised of three key components: regional trends described in terms of demographic and economic growth and changing geographies, landscape character illustrated by spatial resource information, and regional guidelines expressed through federal agency and commonwealth of Virginia commitments for the restoration and protection of the Chesapeake Bay.

Compiled primarily by the Conservation Fund, indicators of regional trends include population change between 1970 and 2000, estimated future population growth to 2030, evolving geographies expressed through changes in local farm and forest lands, and delineation of areas anticipated to be most likely to incur future growth. In addition to trends, the Conservation Fund also compiled relevant information derived from the current comprehensive land use plan for Westmoreland County regarding local zoning and subdivision ordinances for lands surrounding the park, including corridor protection (greenbelts) along principal travel routes to the park. A slight decline in forestlands throughout the county is attributed to a combination of residential development and conversion to farmland. The continued loss of farms and farmland is a result of fewer working farms, escalation of farming costs, retirement among farmers, changes in employment away from farming, and increased value of land for development.

Relying primarily on the resource lands assessment completed by staff of the Chesapeake Bay Program, several spatial data layers have been assembled illustrating the resource-rich character of the region. The assessment was conducted for all lands within the 64,000-square-mile Chesapeake Bay watershed (including all of the lands encompassed by the Northern Neck, a five-county peninsula bounded on the north by the Potomac River, on the east by the Chesapeake Bay, and on the south by the Rappahannock River) to delineate priority resource lands and guide a commitment to "preserve from development 20 percent of the land area in the watershed by 2010." Resource data layers include land cover, ecological systems, lands important for water quality and watershed integrity, and prime farmlands.

Additional information delineating priority biological lands and connecting corridors has been developed through the Virginia Conservation Lands Needs Assessment. Beyond the identification of important lands surrounding the park, this resource information could further inform local decision-making by directing future growth toward appropriate lands for residential and commercial development while identifying important lands to protect.

Management of the region's natural resources is further influenced by the *Chesapeake 2000 Agreement*, which provides performance-based commitments leading toward the restoration and protection of the Chesapeake Bay. Both the commonwealth of Virginia and the National Park Service are partners in *Chesapeake 2000*. In addition to land preservation, the agreement establishes specific commitments for sustaining resource-based economic activities such as commercial fishing, farming, and timber harvesting; the preparation and implementation of locally developed watershed management plans; the use of sound land management practices; and the attainment of water pollution reduction goals (reductions in nitrogen, phosphorus, and sediment). The agreement and its individual commitments provide a regional framework for resource management which, in turn, guides the implementation of local decisions structured to meet the needs of local communities while also addressing important restoration and protection needs of the Chesapeake Bay.

Beyond the interaction between park and region influenced by trends, landscape character, and guidelines, park managers and other NPS staff serve a key leadership role in the protection, management, and interpretation of natural, historical, and cultural resources through involvement in various local initiatives. Park staff, for example, have participated in an evolving effort to establish the Northern Neck Rural Heritage area "to protect, preserve and promote our history and water heritage; and to enhance fishing, farms, forests and villages, with consideration for sustainable economic development and public access." The heritage area initiative could effectively inform managed growth throughout the region and establish a framework for heritage tourism. Service staff have also supported the establishment of the Northern Neck Land Conservancy, a group of concerned citizens organized "to preserve the rural heritage of the Northern Neck by conserving its lands, waters, economics, and culture for future generations." These locally driven initiatives will strengthen capacity for sustaining important resource values and provide the "fabric" necessary to preserve the unique sense of place found only on Virginia's Northern Neck.