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George Washington Birthplace National Monument: **A Chesapeake Bay Park;** **Or, Why Study Nature in the Cultural Environment?**

In the past, interpretation of historic sites within the National Park System was often constrained by policies and philosophies that most of us today consider artificial. We may have been told to only discuss events that actually occurred on the grounds that we are using as a platform for educational purposes. We may have also felt that we could only discuss the period of a prominent figure's life that was actually lived within the boundaries of the historic site. Today, such parameters seem antiquated and erroneous. At George Washington Birthplace National Monument, should we limit our discussion of his life to only the first three years when he resided at the plantation where he was born? Should we ignore all of the accomplishments for which we honor him in American history? I certainly think not, and we do not artificially constrain our interpreters at the park any longer. Our newly published comprehensive interpretive plan recognizes that George Washington and his life are the most notable of all of the untold stories at our site.

In today's world of park management, many people are so focused on the use of strategic planning to direct available resources to appropriate needs that the big picture of our overall mandates sometimes becomes lost. A case in point is the development of primary themes and primary resources emanating only from the enabling legislation that established the park originally. While this may be acceptable in terms of determining how to distribute the available funding, it is an abrogation of the broad spectrum of National Park Service (NPS) legislative responsibilities to forget about the natural resources in a cultural park or the cultural resources in a natural area.

The Redwood Act Amendments direct the NPS to manage all resources to the greatest degree of preservation possible. It should be anathema to all NPS employees to grade the importance of the resources according to the language of a single piece of legislation. For many parks, their organic legislation is as short as a sentence and was written fifty or more years ago before many of the laws which have enhanced the NPS Organic Act were even dreamed of. In addition, if there were no controversy regarding the park's creation there may be no congressional record to examine.

One of the truths that I believe should be self-evident is that all cul-

tural and historic sites are built on a foundation of natural resources of one type or another. When one stands on a battlefield of yore, the question often occurs: Why did the battle take place in this exact spot? When visiting seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sites such as tidewater plantations and Native American villages that were probably sited with more deliberation than the average battlefield, one always wonders, Why is this place the one that we revere and honor? Why do I want my children to bring their grandchildren here to contemplate the life and events memorialized on this spot?

More often than not the answer lies with the site's natural resources. Colonists built their homes on the river not for the view, but because the river was transportation and a source of food and communication with the outside world. Lands for battles are chosen because someone wanted to defend a hill or needed a plain or a valley to enact their strategy to defeat the enemy. The topography, the forests, the meadows, and most of all the watershed determine many of the choices that our ancestors made, just as they determine the parameters of the choices we make today. As a result they have also determined many of the places that we now consider hallowed ground and "sacred places."

What better example of this phenomena is there than the great Chesapeake Bay and many of the lands that surround it? One of the

sites I manage for the National Park Service, George Washington Birthplace National Monument, is located on the Potomac at a point where the river spans seven miles. There are few places where the artificial distinction between natural and cultural resources is so apparent. The home site was on a hill just above an estuary, protected from the river by a barrier beach. Was this ancestral home of the Washington family in America chosen at random or for some sociocultural reason? Not likely. The natural resources are the basis of all of our cultural conventions in one form or another.

Therefore, it is not unusual that we interpret the importance of the Chesapeake Bay here at an NPS site established to memorialize George Washington. It would be harder to comprehend if we did not provide the public with the tools to understand how important the Bay was to the creation of these Mid-Atlantic colonies—and indeed to the creation of America as we know it today. It would be unusual, I believe, if we did not stress the importance of natural resource stewardship at the home of the first American president, a man who recognized that wise use of national heritage is what differentiates a great nation from the ephemeral political entities that so many democracies have become.

The Chesapeake Bay also has its own history, and not just one of erosion and fishes. The plentitude of resources harvested from the Bay is

what drew and sustained the original English colonists here in America. The Bay itself, and the relationship of humans to this body of water, is what built the cities from Baltimore to Norfolk. The Bay was the lifeblood of our early American society.

And then it became a waste depository for our industrial society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Everything from petrochemicals to sewage flowed into this holy and noble bay. Eventually our mistakes were recognized, however, and the changes that have occurred since then are an inspiration for all to emulate in other important and despoiled waters. The story of the Bay cleanup is one of people coming together for a common goal. Senators Charles "Mac" Mathias and Paul Sarbanes of Maryland and Senators John Warner and Charles Robb of Virginia have consistently worked to ensure steady progress on this massive undertaking. Recently, our own state delegate from the district that

includes Washington's Birthplace National Monument, Tayloe Murphy, received the Sierra Club Environmental award for his lifetime of efforts on the Chesapeake Bay Program. Protecting the environment has been an American effort since George Washington first outlined the importance of environmental stewardship. Natural resources are an essential part of the ambience and story at every historic site. The Chesapeake Bay, the Potomac River, the estuaries and creeks, the night sky, the eagles and whistling swans—all contribute to helping the visitor understand what George Washington experienced when he stood on the banks of Popes Creek as a toddler, as a teenager, and, finally, as a man. At George Washington Birthplace National Monument, we will continue to honor the efforts at conservation that our first president recognized as the most important effort that any people can make.

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