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Books, History, and Life in General

February 22, 1732 – George Washington's Birthday – Sort Of

Posted on [02/22/2013](#) by [rhapsodyinbooks](#)

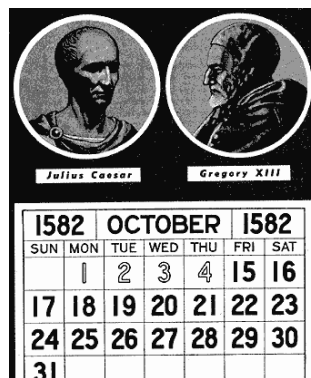
George Washington was born, according to the calendar in use in 1732, on February 11. But when he was twenty, the Julian Calendar was abandoned in favor of the Gregorian Calendar. February 11 became February 22.



George Washington as painted by Charles Willson Peale probably between June and August of 1780

Can you imagine a change like this getting legislated today? (And if you think switching over was a problem back then, Greece was using the Julian all the way up until 1922!) But a recognition of astronomical miscalculations from Caesar’s time justified the change. Julius Caesar’s administration had mandated the 12-month calendar in 45 B.C. based on the solar year. However, the solar year does not contain a whole number of days or months. So Caesar (with help from his advisors) came up with a leap year formula that would add an extra day every 128 years. Alas, he overcompensated, and by the mid-sixteenth century, seasonal equinoxes were falling 10 days too early, and some church holidays, such as Easter, did not always correspond to the proper seasons.

In light of these discrepancies, in 1582 Pope Gregory XIII authorized the “Gregorian” or “New Style” Calendar.” Ten days were dropped from the month of October, and the formula for determining leap years was revised. January 1 was also established as the first day of the new year. (That date was not uniformly observed at the time.) The new calendar was adopted immediately in Catholic countries. Protestant countries continued to use the Julian Calendar.



Thus, from 1582 to 1752, two different calendars were in use in Europe. To avoid misinterpretation, a designation for both the “Old Style” and “New Style” year was often used in English and colonial records. It was just getting too confusing.

In 1750, an Act of Parliament mandated that England and its colonies would change to the Gregorian calendar in 1752. By that time, the divergence between the two calendars had grown to 11 days. To adjust, it was decreed that September 2, 1752 would be followed by September 14, 1752.

So when did Washington celebrate his birthday? It seems as if he went with both days! The first public celebration on record was at Valley Forge on February 22, 1778, when the Continental Artillery band serenaded Washington. But in 1781, Washington thanked Comte de Rochambeau for celebrating his birthday on the 11th. Tobias Lear, the personal secretary to President Washington from 1784 until the former-President's death in 1799, wrote to Clement Biddle in 1790:

“In reply to your wish to know the Presidents [sic] birthday it will be sufficient to observe that it is on the 11th of February Old Style; but the almanack [sic] makers have generally set it down opposite to the 11th day of February of the present Style; how far that may go towards establishing it on that day I dont [sic] know; but I could never consider it any otherways [sic] than as stealing so many days from his valuable life as is the difference between the old and the new Style....”

In that same year, Philadelphia celebrated the birthday on the 11th, and New York City on the 22nd.

Two years later, Lear indicated in a letter to Thomas Jefferson that Washington was favoring the 22nd::

“T. Lear has the honor to inform Mr. Jefferson that the President considers the 22d day of this month as his birthday, having been born on the 11th old Style.”

Indeed, on February 22, 1797, Washington wrote in his diary of attending an “entertainment” in honor of his “birth night.”

His diary entry for February 12, 1798, however, has him writing:

“Went with the family to a Ball in Alexa. given by the Citzen[s] [sic] of it & its vicinity in commemoration of the Anniversary of my birth day [sic].”

So what's the answer? It seems as if Washington decided he could have his cake and eat it too, twice in each year in fact! So two ways to celebrate are included here, so you too can celebrate twice! On one day, you could go with his favorite breakfast, which according to the [Mt. Vernon website](#) (also the source of the specifics about celebrations in Washington's time) was hoecakes “swimming” in butter and honey.



Washington's step-granddaughter, Nelly Custis Lewis, who was raised at Mount Vernon, wrote:

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He rose before sunrise, always wrote or read until 7 in summer or half past seven in winter. His breakfast was then ready – he ate three small mush cakes (Indian meal) swimming in butter and honey, and drank three cups of tea without cream.”

She described the recipe in a letter, and the Mt. Vernon website cites this but also adds a modern adaptation:

George Washington’s Favorite Hoecakes

8 3/4 cups white cornmeal

1/4 teaspoons dry yeast

1 egg

Warm water

Shortening or other cooking grease

Honey & Butter

In large container, mix together 4 cups white cornmeal, 1 1/4 teaspoons dry yeast, and enough warm water to give the mixture the consistency of pancake batter (probably 3-4 cups). Cover and set on the stove or counter overnight.

In the morning, gradually add remaining cornmeal, egg and enough warm water to give the mixture the consistency of pancake batter (3-4 cups). Cover and set aside for 15 to 20 minutes.

Add cooking grease to a griddle or skillet and heat until water sprinkled onto it will bead up.

Pour batter, by the spoonful, onto the hot griddle. (Note: since the batter has a tendency to separate, you will need to stir it well before pouring each batch.) When the hoecake is brown on one side, turn it over and brown the other. Serve warm with butter and honey.

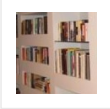
But don’t stop there! He celebrated both days, and so can you! Here is a [recipe](#) for his favorite cake (according to his wife, Martha):

Martha Washington’s Great Cake

Take 40 eggs and divide the whites from the yolks and beat them to a froth. Then work 4 pounds of butter to a cream and put the whites of eggs to it a Spoon full at a time till it is well work’d. Then put 4 pounds of sugar finely powdered to it in the same manner then put in the Yolks of eggs and 5 pounds of flour and 5 pounds of fruit. 2 hours will bake it. Add to it half an ounce of mace and nutmeg half a pint of wine and some fresh brandy.

Notes on making Martha Washington’s Great Cake:

In making the great cake, Mount Vernon’s curatorial staff followed Mrs. Washington’s recipe almost exactly. Where the recipe called for 5 pounds of fruit, without specifying which ones, 2 pounds of raisins, 1 pound of currants, and 2 pounds of apples were used. The wine used was cream sherry. Since no pan large enough was available to hold all the batter, two 14 layers were made and stacked (note: the original was one single tall layer). The layers were baked in a 350 degree oven for 1.5 hours. Should be iced with a very stiff egg-white based icing, flavored with rosewater or orange-flower water.

**About rhapsodyinbooks**

We're into reading, politics, and intellectual exchanges.

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24 Responses to *February 22, 1732 – George Washington’s Birthday – Sort Of*



Beth F says:

02/22/2013 at 4:36 am

Those hoecakes sound yummy! And I've often thought about that calendar change and wondered about figuring out birthdays and holidays. Also I wondered how weird it would be to simply not have 2 weeks in September. It's hard enough adjusting to daylight savings time.

[Reply](#)



[Diane@BibliophilebytheSea](#) says:

02/22/2013 at 5:57 am

What an interesting post and I learned something new “hoecake”....LOL actually sounds good.

[Reply](#)



[Sandy](#) says:

02/22/2013 at 6:24 am

I would like some hoecakes please, swimming in butter. Maybe with some preserves or chocolate on top. Thanks.

And this change in calendar thing has come up two or three times in books I've read lately. The Catherine the Great book, Slammerkin, and maybe one more. Weird how I knew nothing about it, then all the sudden that is all I see.

[Reply](#)



[bermudaonion\(Kathy\)](#) says:

02/22/2013 at 6:48 am

Hey, I'm with George – if they switched calendars on us now, I'd celebrate both days too!

[Reply](#)



[jama](#) says:

02/22/2013 at 7:08 am

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Those old recipes are really something — such big quantities, especially for Martha’s Cake. The modern recipe you included here for hoecakes makes more sense — I don’t know why Crump’s recipe says to refrigerate the mixture.

Thanks for the link love. Enjoyed this post!

[Reply](#)



Charlie says:

02/22/2013 at 8:09 am

A very good reason for two birthdays. This was a fantastic read, thank you for informing us!

[Reply](#)



Trish says:

02/22/2013 at 1:12 pm

Once you make Martha’s cake, please let me know how it turns out. And then create a post so I can pin it. Thanks.

But seriously about the calendar change? I had no idea. And people were riotous when the Zodiac calendar changed a few years ago (not me, I’m still a Leo either way but my brother-in-law with a giant Libra tattoo on his back was kinda miffed).

Great post. I LOVE the things I learn on your blog.

[Reply](#)



zibilee says:

02/22/2013 at 1:41 pm

This is very interesting, and also sort of confusing! But the recipe looks great, and might make a great brunch for one day after church! Thanks for sharing it!

[Reply](#)



Stefanie says:

02/22/2013 at 2:12 pm

What fascinating information about the calendar and George Washington! 40 eggs in Martha’s cake? That must have been some cake! And is it me or does George’s head look too small for the rest of his body in that painting?

[Reply](#)



rhapsodyinbooks says:

02/23/2013 at 5:36 am

LOL – no you are not the only one who notices such a thing! On the positive side, if an accurate portrayal, he could wear “one size fits all” hats! –)

[Reply](#)



Laurie C says:

02/23/2013 at 10:10 am

It may be his belly is just too big for his head! Too many hoecakes and too much cake?

[Reply](#)



Caite@ a lovely shore breeze says:

02/22/2013 at 3:08 pm

[Reply](#)**[anovelsource1](#)** says:

02/22/2013 at 4:05 pm

Wow I learn something new every day! Thank you for the history lesson and definitely for the recipes ~ I’m going to try those hoecakes this weekend! Very very cool post!

[Reply](#)**Rikki** says:

02/23/2013 at 6:12 am

The hoecakes sound super delicious. Will save the recipe.

[Reply](#)**[Rebecca @ The Key to the Gate](#)** says:

02/23/2013 at 6:29 am

The hoecakes have me dreaming of a big breakfast this morning! I really enjoyed this post! Oddly enough, I had never thought much on the impact the calendar change had. Two birthdays might not be such a bad idea! As long as you can count the same age twice!

Thanks so much for sharing!

Rebecca @ The Key to the Gate

[Reply](#)**[Diane \(@bookchickdi\)](#)** says:

02/23/2013 at 8:17 am

What a fascinating post! You clearly did a lot of research, great job.

[Reply](#)**[Barbara](#)** says:

02/23/2013 at 9:55 am

This reminds me of the days before standard time in this country. BTW, I was NOT alive then. Every little town or county or portion of a state had their own time. Then trains began to cross the country and scheduling them was impossible. Now we all go by the same time, except that some states don’t switch to daylight savings time. How confusing would it have been when people started traveling by plane?

[Reply](#)**[lakesidemusing](#)** says:

02/23/2013 at 3:16 pm

Such an interesting post, Jill. Love that Washington celebrated both days. Yes, please, to the hoecakes!

[Reply](#)**[Staci@LifeintheThumb](#)** says:

02/23/2013 at 6:37 pm

I learn more from your posts than I ever have anywhere else!!! You are pretty awesome and so is that cake!!!!!!

[Reply](#)

**Lisa** says:

02/24/2013 at 12:14 pm

And we thought it was hard to change to metric! Oh wait, we couldn’t even manage that. We would never be able to handle a change like this now.

[Reply](#)**sprungatlast** says:

02/24/2013 at 5:22 pm

I just love these recipes – I’ve shared them with my DAR friends (who love this sort of thing). Thank you for posting!

[Reply](#)**Fay** says:

02/24/2013 at 9:09 pm

The yeast must give the hoecakes an interesting bread-like texture. I’d like to try to make these.

[Reply](#)**Jenners** says:

02/25/2013 at 8:11 pm

If that happened to me, I’d celebrate my birthday twice! And anything swimming in butter gotta be good!

[Reply](#)**softdrink** says:

03/03/2013 at 7:58 pm

Sounds like George had quite the sweet tooth. That’s my kind of president!

[Reply](#)

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