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Looking back at the 1976 birthday parade

As Alexandria celebrates the nation's 250th birthday this year, we look back to the George Washington Birthday Parade 50 years ago, in 1976.

While Alexandria had long emphasized its history and role in the country's founding, the 1976 Bicentennial Celebration restored and boosted historic study and preservation of Alexandria. Many of the museums in Alexandria today – including Gadsby's Tavern Museum, the Alexandria History Museum at the Lyceum and Carlyle House – received major renovations as part of the preparations for the bicentennial celebrations.

The February 1976 Fairfax County Bicentennial Newsletter noted: "On Monday, February 16, the legal holiday for George Washington's birthday, a patriotic ceremony will be held at Market Square before the city's traditional George Washington Birthday Parade begins at 2:00 P.M. George and Martha Washington will review the parade in front of Gadsby's Tavern."

The newsletter noted that the Tavern would be "fully restored and open to the public as a working colonial tavern and museum at a special ceremony on February 16, 1976."

This year's parade theme is George Washington: Virginia's Son and America's Founding Father, honoring Washington's role in the founding of our country. The 2026 grand marshals are Michael J. Elston, the National President General of the Sons of the American Revolution, and Ginnie Sebastian Storage, the National President General of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Besides the annual birthday parade on Saturday, readers can take a specialty tour of Gadsby's Tavern Museum focusing on "Hamilton's BFFs & Frenemies," attend a wreath laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier of the Revolution at the Old Presbyterian Meeting House and, on President's Day, can listen to Gen. George Washington at the Friendship Firehouse Annual Breakfast.

Fifty years after the Bicentennial Celebrations, Alexandria celebrates George Washington's Birthday in much the same fashion as it did in 1976. Rather than newly restored museums, Alexandrians have the opportunity to visit eight museums owned and operated by the city, which both preserve and reinterpret our long history for free.

This year's George Washington Birthday Parade takes place on Saturday. The parade route is altered this year to accommodate the City Hall renovation. For more information on the parade, please visit washingtonbirthday.com.

The 1976 Bicentennial Celebration restored the historic preservation of Alexandria.

PHOTO/GADSBY'S TAVERN MUSEUM

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.