

George Washington Slept Here!

Really!



Written by **Dan Whetzel**
Photography by **Lance C. Bell**

George Washington's Headquarters in Riverside Park at 38 Greene Street, Cumberland, Maryland.

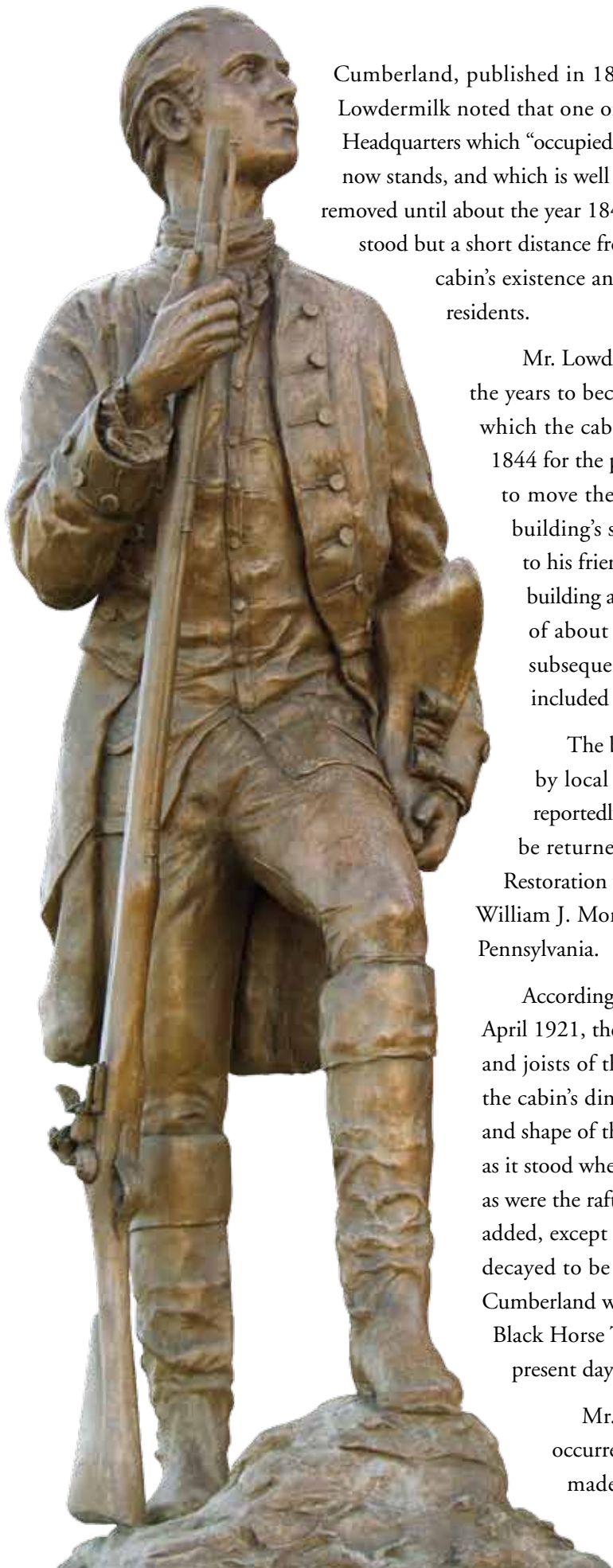
Facing page: Statue of young George Washington at the site of Fort Cumberland; currently the location of the Allegany County Courthouse at 30 Washington St., Cumberland, MD.

George Washington really did sleep here! In fact, he spent many nights at the confluence of Will's Creek and the Potomac River during the mid to late eighteenth century. George Washington's introduction to Western Maryland began as a young surveyor in 1748 and ended as Commander-in-Chief in 1794, book ends of time that made him a familiar figure to those associated with colonial Western Maryland. One present day reminder of his service in the area is located at Riverside Park in Cumberland, Maryland, and referred to as George Washington's Headquarters. The cabin structure is a familiar landmark to residents and a destination point for visitors. How the cabin came to be located at Riverside Park, however, is a story decades in the making.

A Maryland State Roads Commission historical marker located at Prospect Square on Washington Street informs visitors that George Washington's Headquarters

and Fort Cumberland, structures built in 1755 as part of Great Britain's military buildup during the French and Indian War (1754-1763), were located nearby. Although George Washington had previously been close to Cumberland in 1748 as a surveyor and in Cumberland during 1753 and 1754 as a Lieutenant Colonel from Virginia, it was not until 1755 that General Edward Braddock's men erected the cabin and fort complex overlooking Will's Creek that associated the man with the log cabin headquarters. The building would have probably been situated on a lot adjoining the present day historical marker and occupied by Washington in 1755, 1758, and 1794.

The boundaries of Fort Cumberland have been documented by historians, but Washington's Headquarters does not appear in time period maps or manuscripts. The most authoritative source referencing the cabin's existence and location appeared in Will H. Lowdermilk's History of



Cumberland, published in 1878. In a survey of historic Cumberland houses, Lowdermilk noted that one of the most venerable was known as Washington's Headquarters which "occupied the ground on which Mr. O.C. Gephart's residence now stands, and which is well remembered by hundreds of citizens, as it was not removed until about the year 1844. It was contemporary with Fort Cumberland and stood but a short distance from the parade ground." Subsequent reports of the cabin's existence and location were corroborated by several long time residents.

Mr. Lowdermilk noted the original cabin was modified over the years to become a one and a half-story dwelling. The lot on which the cabin set was purchased by Judge Thomas Perry in 1844 for the purpose of building a residence, so plans were made to move the historic structure. Judge Perry appreciated the building's significance and, according to Lowdermilk, sold it to his friend, George Blocher. Mr. Blocher disassembled the building and moved it to a farm on Bedford Road, a distance of about one mile. Lowdermilk noted the building was subsequently repaired and occupied by John Baker. Repairs included weather boarding and the addition of a slate roof.

The building remained on Bedford Road until purchased by local historian James Walter Thomas. Mr. Thomas reportedly sought to purchase and restore the cabin so it could be returned to a location near the site of Fort Cumberland. Restoration was subsequently placed in the hands of contractor William J. Morley who rebuilt a similar structure at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.

According to a *Cumberland Evening Times* report published in April 1921, the restoration required that the original sills, plates, and joists of the old building be re-laid to accurately determine the cabin's dimensions. Replacing the rafters provided the pitch and shape of the roof. The report stated, "The entire groundwork as it stood when occupied by Washington was intact and was used, as were the rafters, plates, and binders, and nothing new has been added, except the best tile roof obtainable." Where logs were too decayed to be replaced, those from the next oldest building in Cumberland were substituted. The substitute logs came from the Black Horse Tavern located along South Mechanic Street, near present day Canal Place.

Mr. Thomas' purchase and restoration of the cabin occurred in concert with city of Cumberland officials who made a formal request that he donate and place it at

Riverside Park, a location in view of the site where the fort once stood. Mr. Thomas agreed to the proposal and plans were made to dedicate and name the building “George Washington’s Headquarters.”

Unfortunately for Mr. Thomas, Cumberland Mayor Thomas Koon, and city officials, an objection was raised against the dedication of the building. Mr. A.K. Hummelshime, Police and Fire Commissioner, wrote a sarcastic letter attempting to discredit the claim that the log cabin was used by George Washington. He further stated that the logs used in the building were collected from various locations over a period of 150 years and were being assembled in 1921 for the first time as George Washington’s Headquarters.

Commissioner Hummelshime’s communication was challenged by Mayor Koon at the March 14, 1921, city council meeting. When pressed on the charges against the cabin, Mr. Hummelshime did not offer specific facts and admitted the letter was based on hearsay. City officials cited Mr. Lowdermilk’s work and related testimonies about the cabin before making the unusual moves of refusing to accept the letter and of striking Commissioner Hummelshime’s remarks from the official minutes.

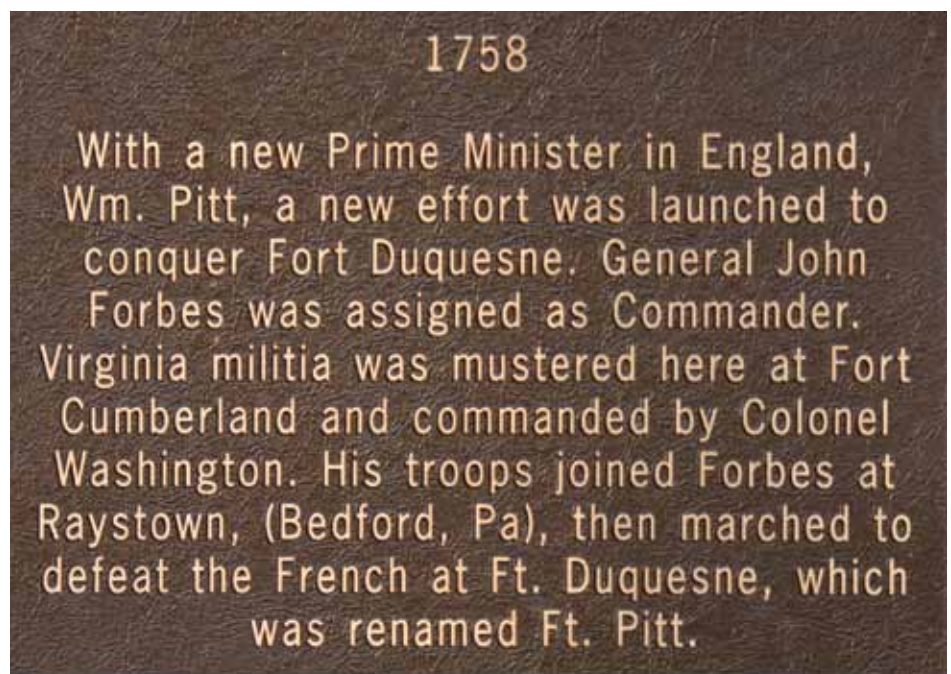
Apparently, both city officials and Mr. Lowdermilk were unaware of another source of information that offered some support as to the cabin’s authenticity. The April 1857 issue of *Harper’s Weekly* published



Portrait of Colonel George Washington during his command at Fort Cumberland.

an article by Brantz Mayer titled “With Some Wanderings in the Footsteps of Washington, Braddock, and the Early Pioneers.” In recounting his travels through Western Maryland, the author noted that “the weather-beaten hovel which Washington occupied as his quarters more than a hundred years ago, still stood behind the fort in the rickety rain delineated by our artist; but has been removed to make way for a modern dwelling.” The artist’s rendering depicts a one and a half-story dwelling with a Swiss cabin attached; this rendering is in keeping with Lowdermilk’s account.

The *Harper’s Weekly* story and sketch are not without questions, however, because the building had been moved from the fort site more than a decade earlier leaving one to assume the artist either visited the Blocher farm to view the old cabin or questioned local residents about its appearance. The article does not specifically mention which source



was used as a basis for the sketch, thereby casting some doubt on how the artist determined the cabin's style.

Questions about the building's authenticity were ended for the time being after the city council meeting and the dedication occurred as planned at Riverside Park on April 21, 1921; it was a noteworthy event witnessed by thousands of residents. The highlight of the ceremony was the arrival of General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing, former Commander of the American Expeditionary Force in World War I. General Pershing was accompanied by Major Charles Bridge, representing the British government, and aide-de-camp Major General George C. Marshall. (George C. Marshall later served as Chief of Staff of the Army, Secretary of State, and Secretary of Defense). Grand Army veterans and local dignitaries joined the entourage in a parade through downtown Cumberland.



Top photo: Marker in the middle of Washington Street, Cumberland, Maryland, showing a corner location of Fort Cumberland. Several makers are easily visible at this area near the Allegany County Courthouse at 30 Washington St.

Middle photo: John Kennedy Lacock's illustrated postcard of Fort Cumberland.

Courtesy of Albert and Angela Feldstein collection.

Bottom photo and facing page: Information plaques on the base of George Washington statue located at 30 Washington Street, Cumberland, MD.

PRESIDENT WASHINGTON'S LAST VISIT - 1794

On October 16, 1794, President George Washington arrived in Cumberland to review about 5,000 troops of the Maryland and Virginia militia gathered here during the Whiskey Rebellion. A few days later, this militia army assembled upon the parade ground of old Fort Cumberland, where the Allegany County Courthouse now stands. The President appeared dressed in his full military uniform, and the entire population of the town was present to witness this historic event. General Washington rode along the line, from right to left, and was loudly cheered by the men. Afterwards the command marched in review, and Washington raised his hat as a salute, while they passed. Generals Henry Lee and Daniel Morgan also were present and participated.

The procession passed enthusiastic citizens who lined Park and Baltimore Streets en route to Riverside Park. At Washington Street, General Pershing halted his vehicle so he could face and review the honor guard of ex-servicemen who had served in World War I combat divisions; all branches of the armed forces were represented and received stirring ovations. The General continued a short distance to Riverside Park where he expressed appreciation for being invited to the event. Following the conclusion of ceremonies, Generals Pershing, Marshall, and Bridge were invited to "Rose Hill," the home of donor James Walter Thomas for a public reception. Festivities concluded in the evening when General Pershing and Maryland Governor Albert Ritchie were guests of honor at a Masonic Lodge banquet.

Soon after the building's relocation to Riverside Park, the local Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution agreed to furnish and host the site for special occasions. Time period artifacts and costumes have been assembled over the years to create the appropriate setting for Washington's service in Cumberland.

George Washington's Headquarters has been listed in the Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties (AL-IV-047) since 1975. The inventory does not evaluate the historical significance of properties or confer any protection or benefits; rather it highlights them for reference purposes only. The headquarters has not been listed in the National Registry because it does not meet the strict criteria required by the National Park Service. The cabin was moved at least twice, thus making it ineligible. The first move was especially troublesome since detailed records of its disassembly do not exist. Despite the failure to be placed in the National

Registry, the cabin commemorates the historically significant service of George Washington in Western Maryland, while reminding everyone that he really did sleep here.

George Washington's Headquarters is open during special occasions but may be viewed anytime at its Riverside Park location at 40 Greene Street in Cumberland.



General John "Black Jack" Pershing, along with Cumberland Mayor Thomas Koon, arriving for the dedication of Washington's cabin in Riverside Park on April 21, 1921.

This photo is part of the Herman and Stacia Miller Collection and has been printed courtesy of the Mayor and City Council of Cumberland, Maryland.



James Walter Thomas, local historian, purchased and restored Washington's cabin and along with Cumberland officials, was instrumental in placing it at Riverside Park in Cumberland, Maryland.



Official Souvenir Program

Formal Acceptance

The Headquarters of General George Washington of Fort Cumberland
During the French and English War
By the Mayor and City Council of Cumberland, Maryland
Thursday, April 21, 1921

Program

Presentation of the American Flag by Patriotic Order Sons
of America of Cumberland
Congressman Frederick N. Zihlman

Reception of the Flag . . . Tasker G. Lowndes on behalf of the City

Presiding Officer, Hon. Ferdinand Williams

Invocation Rev. James E. Moffatt

Music By the Band

Presentation of the Building to the City of Cumberland
James Walter Thomas, L. L. D.

Formal Acceptance of the Building by the Mayor of Cumberland
Hon. Thomas W. Koon

Music By the Band

Presentation of the Official Representative of the
Royal Government of England

Address

His Excellency, Hon. Albert C. Ritchie, Governor of Maryland

Music By the Band

Address Hon. George Weems Williams

Presentation of General John J. Pershing

Music By the Band

Benediction Rev. Fr. Marcellus

Top photo: Thousands of Cumberland residents line Baltimore street as General Pershing's motorcade passes enroute to Riverside Park for Washington's cabin dedication, April 21, 1921. General Pershing is in the right rear seat of the first car. Photo by James Edward Grabenstein courtesy of the Albert and Angela Feldstein collection.

Inset photo: General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing. Program photos: Original program for the dedication of George Washington's Headquarters in Riverside Park, April 21, 1921. Courtesy of the Albert and Angela Feldstein collection.