

## Potomac partners

**Alexandria, Va., where our first president slept, ate, danced and worked, is a capital destination itself - and a good base for a visit to the nation's capital across the river.**

By Bill Reed

INQUIRER ASSISTANT TRAVEL EDITOR



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ALEXANDRIA, Va. - George Washington didn't just sleep here. He ate, drank and danced here. He worshipped and worked here. He helped build this port city and create a nation here.

He even got his prescriptions filled here.

And when he retired, it was to his childhood home, Mount Vernon, about eight miles down the Potomac River.

So, it's easy to get caught up in the history of this quaint, colonial, cobblestone town that is practically within a silver dollar's toss of, appropriately, Washington, D.C.

But, there are plenty more reasons to visit. You can bike along the Potomac or go boating on it. Try restaurants that offer everything from steak and seafood to creole, Caribbean and Asian cuisine - or eat at Gadsby's Tavern, where George ate. Browse in antiques shops and art galleries. Shop in boutiques or at the country's oldest continually operating farmers market.

Pets are welcome - the city's cartoon mascot is Alex, a Scottish terrier - and there's a shop, Barkley Square Gourmet Dog Bakery & Boutique, just for them.

You can use the city as home base to tour Washington - it's a 20-minute ride on the Metrorail. One word of warning: If you start exploring Alexandria first, you might never make it across the river.

To get a feel for the history and the flavor of the town, start with a tour of the historic district. You can buy tickets for guided walking or bus tours, or you can do it yourself on foot or bike or in your car.

Begin at the Visitors Center in the Ramsay House, a re-creation of the 1724 home of William Ramsay, a Scottish merchant and a founder of Alexandria.

The town's Scottish heritage dates to 1669, when Scotsman John Alexander bought the land from an English ship captain for 6,000 pounds of tobacco. In 1749, Scottish and English merchants got permission to establish the town, which they named after Alexander.

Down North Fairfax Street from the Ramsay House is the Carlyle House, completed in 1753 as the city's grandest and most distinctive home. Two years later, Scottish merchant John Carlyle's Georgian Palladian manor house hosted a meeting of the royal governors of five colonies - including Pennsylvania - to discuss financing for the French and Indian War. Their proposal to the crown: Tax the colonies.

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We headed to Washington's re-created townhouse (now a private residence), where he would stay when he couldn't make it back to Mount Vernon. Then we visited the Torpedo Factory Art Center, watching a sculptor work in one of the 84 studios and checking out the Archaeology Museum. (Yes, there are a few torpedoes on display, as a reminder of their production there after World War I and around the clock during World War II.)

In fact, if you are more interested in art than history, you can plot your own tour of the Torpedo Factory and the city's 20 other art galleries and 30 antique shops, Civil War sites, African American history sites or the Upper Old Town.

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Gadsby's was one of the finest taverns in the city, Jim Williams says as he leads us on a guided tour through the three-story building built in 1785 by John Wise, known as the city's "Tavern King."

There were grog shops for the port's sailors, but the young country's power brokers - John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe and the Marquis de Lafayette - frequented the City Tavern, mingling with merchants, farmers and tradesmen.

The tavern had public rooms "only for men, where they ate, drank, smoked, played cards and backgammon" and slept, Williams says. But, it also had private dining rooms with linens, fine china, silverware and a looking glass. The affluent diners might bring their servants to serve them and a flute player for entertainment.

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The ballroom on the second floor of the addition, with its musicians' balcony reachable only by ladder, became known across the young country as the place Washington liked to dance. In 1801, it hosted Jefferson's Inaugural. Today, the re-created room - the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City bought the original woodwork in 1917 and has it on display in its American Wing - hosts everything from 18th-century teas with Martha Washington to Girl Scout sleepovers.



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Wake up early on Saturday to take in the Farmers Market at Market Square. If the bright yellow, pink and purple flowers don't wake you up, a cup of coffee and a ham biscuit should do the trick. Look over the fresh melons, blackberries, figs, tomatoes, zucchini, squash, eggplant and green beans.

If you want something that travels better, check out the jewelry, country crafts and dried-flower arrangements. But don't take too long - the vendors pack up by 10:30. By 1 this particular afternoon, an African Heritage Cultural Festival - one in a series of ethnic summer festivals - took over the square.

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Those with more energy - and a bike - can ride the 18.5-mile Mount Vernon Trail, which extends south to Washington's estate and north to Arlington National Cemetery, the Iwo Jima Memorial, and Theodore Roosevelt Island.

We devised our own plan - to bike to Mount Vernon, tour the home and grounds, then drive to Georgetown to kayak the Potomac. It was a good plan, with a few kinks.

The 8.5-mile ride along the Potomac and the George Washington Memorial Parkway was more challenging than our towpath rides along the Delaware Canal at home, but it was just as enjoyable because the trail is dedicated to cyclists and joggers. Two miles into the ride, though, our nephew couldn't push another pedal, so he and my wife rode back to the car and met us at Mount Vernon.

After touring the 272-year-old mansion and Washington's tomb, we headed to Georgetown for our 2 1/2-hour sunset tour of the Potomac and the D.C. skyline.

Thunderstorms had been forecast all day, but the sky was clear and blue when we started out. Our guide, Brian Stevens, warned that the weather could change instantly and that we should be ready to paddle to shore at any point.

The water was smooth, and paddling the two-person kayaks was much easier than when we kayaked off the Outer Banks or the San Juan Islands. Just as we wondered when we'd be seeing the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial, a black cloud appeared directly above us, and Brian waved us toward a cove. Within seconds, the wind kicked up and rain pelted us.

My wife and daughter had nearly reached the cove when they misstroked a few times and headed back into the choppy river. Then the current got hold of their 14-foot kayak and carried them diagonally across the 3/4-mile-wide river. Brian managed to catch up and shouted instructions for them to keep heading to the far riverbank, where they managed to land safely at the marina.

"That was exciting," Brian said, laughing, after we were reunited. But, the look on his face told us that he had been worried.

"It was extremely dangerous," the guide, who grew up in Vineland and who has been kayaking for six years, said later. "I was thinking that if they overturned, they could hang onto my boat."

Famished from our adventure, we were lucky that many of the Old Town restaurants serve dinner past 10 at night - many also offer live music. We slid into a spacious second-floor booth at the Union Street Public House and watched South Union Street below while we enjoyed steak and seafood.

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When Washington was in town, he worshipped at Christ Church, sitting in box pew No. 5 for the two- to three-hour service, tour guide Carol Ann Detlef says.

The brick country-style church also was Robert E. Lee's boyhood church, and he was confirmed there on July 17, 1853 - at age 47 - with his two daughters. Seven years later, Lee

was a general in the Confederate army while his hometown was occupied by Union troops.

During the war, troops used the church as a chapel instead of a hospital, out of respect for Washington, Detlef says. In the 1890s, it was restored to its colonial style, with Washington's pew the only box pew (renumbered as 60), which you can sit in today.

Washington also was a Freemason and belonged to the Alexandria Lodge. After he and his wife died, his family and friends donated so many artifacts to the lodge that it created the Masonic Museum.

Today, those artifacts, including the bedchamber clock that his doctor stopped at 10:20 p.m. - the exact moment of his death at Mount Vernon - are on display in the George Washington Masonic Memorial. The 333-foot memorial, built from 1922 to 1932 by masons from across the country, towers over the city and draws more than 40,000 visitors a year.

Entering Memorial Hall, you are greeted by a 17-foot bronze statue of Washington. A mural covering the north wall depicts "George Washington and Brethren attending a Saint John's Day Observance, Christ Church, Philadelphia, December 28, 1788." Above the mural, a stained-glass window honors Ben Franklin for some of his accomplishments, including his lightning experiment with his son and founding the first public library in Philadelphia.

The free hour-long guided tour takes you to the observation deck, 400 feet above sea level, where you can see Alexandria stretching to the Potomac. Look north and see the U.S. Capitol and the Washington Monument and south to follow the river toward Mount Vernon.

You can't escape it - this really was George Washington's backyard.

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## Getting to Know the Other Side of the Potomac

Alexandria has the third **historic district** to be established in the country, following Charleston and New Orleans.

Of the city's 2 million visitors each year, 9 percent come from **Pennsylvania**, which is tied with Maryland and trails Virginia (14 percent) and New York (10 percent).

Tourists can receive 24-hour free-parking passes at the **Ramsay House Visitors Center** and free weekend shuttle service on the **DASH** bus system.

At the Ramsay House, get the **Official Visitors Guide**, which has all the information you'll need, including maps and directions for a walking tour.

### Things to See

#### **Alexandria Black History Museum**

902 Wythe St.

703-838-4356

[www.alexblackhistory.org](http://www.alexblackhistory.org)

Originally the segregated library for the city's African Americans, the museum documents the history, culture and contributions of Black America.

### **Carlyle House**

121 N. Fairfax St.

703-549-2997

[www.carlylehouse.org](http://www.carlylehouse.org)

Georgian-style stone mansion built by John Carlyle, a wealthy Scottish merchant and a founder of the city.

### **Christ Church**

118 N. Washington St.

703-549-1450

[www.historicchristchurch.org](http://www.historicchristchurch.org)

Oldest church in the city. See George Washington's box pew and the spot where Robert E. Lee was confirmed.

### **Gadsby's Tavern Museum**

134 N. Royal St.

703-838-4242

[www.gadsbystavern.org](http://www.gadsbystavern.org)

George Washington danced, and Thomas Jefferson celebrated his inauguration at this hotel and tavern that still serves food and drink - and gives tours.

### **George Washington Masonic Memorial**

101 Callahan Dr.

703-683-2007

[www.gwmemorial.org](http://www.gwmemorial.org)

The masons' memorial to their most famous member features spectacular architecture and

contents, including Washington artifacts (such as the bedchamber clock stopped at 10:20 p.m. - the exact moment of his death at Mount Vernon). Take the tour to see the city from the observation deck.

### **Lee-Fendall House**

614 Oronoco St.

703-548-1789

[www.leefendallhouse.org](http://www.leefendallhouse.org)

Home to 37 members of the Lee family from 1785 to 1903.

### **Stabler-Leadbeater Apothecary Museum**

105-107 S. Fairfax St.

703-836-3713

<http://oha.alexandriava.gov/>

apothecary

The Washington and Lee families were customers of this family business. More than 8,000 medical-care items on display.

### **Torpedo Factory Art Center**

105 N. Union St.

703-838-4565

[www.torpedofactory.org](http://www.torpedofactory.org)

Built in 1918 to make torpedoes, the warehouse-sized building houses 84 artists' studios, six galleries, the Art League School, and the Archaeology Museum.

### **U.S. Patent & Trademark**

#### **Office Museum**

600 Dulany St.

571-272-0095

[www.invent.org](http://www.invent.org)

Exhibits about ordinary inventions, such as cornflakes, ketchup and personal computers.

## Places to stay

The only hotels in the Historic District are the **Holiday Inn Select Old Town** and the **Morrison House**.

Several major hotels are clustered in two spots, each about 10 blocks from the district. To the west, near the **King Street Metro** station, are an **Embassy Suites**, a **Fairfield**, a **Hilton** and a **Residence Inn by Marriott**. To the north are a **Best Western**, a **Holiday Inn Hotel & Suites**, a **Radisson**, and a **Sheraton Suites**. Most of them provide free shuttle service to the historic district.

## More information

### **Ramsay House Visitors Center**

221 King St.

703-838-5005

1-800-388-9119

[www.funside.com](http://www.funside.com)

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Contact assistant travel editor Bill Reed at 215-854-2459 or [breed@phillynews.com](mailto:breed@phillynews.com).

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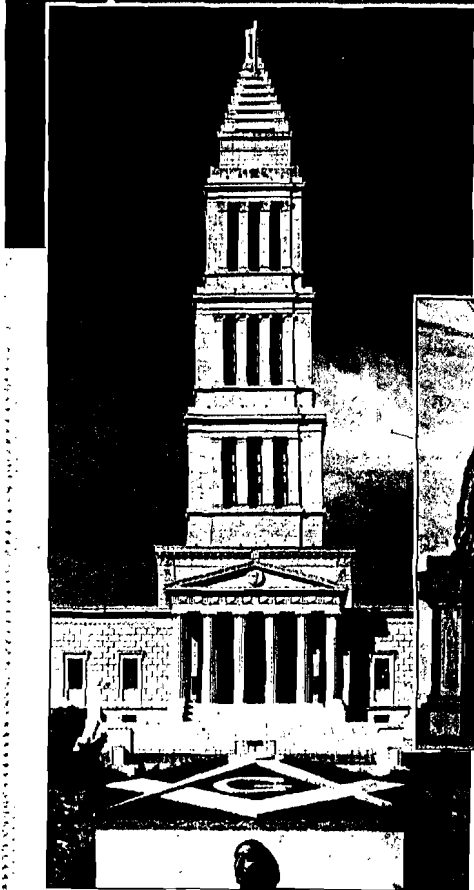
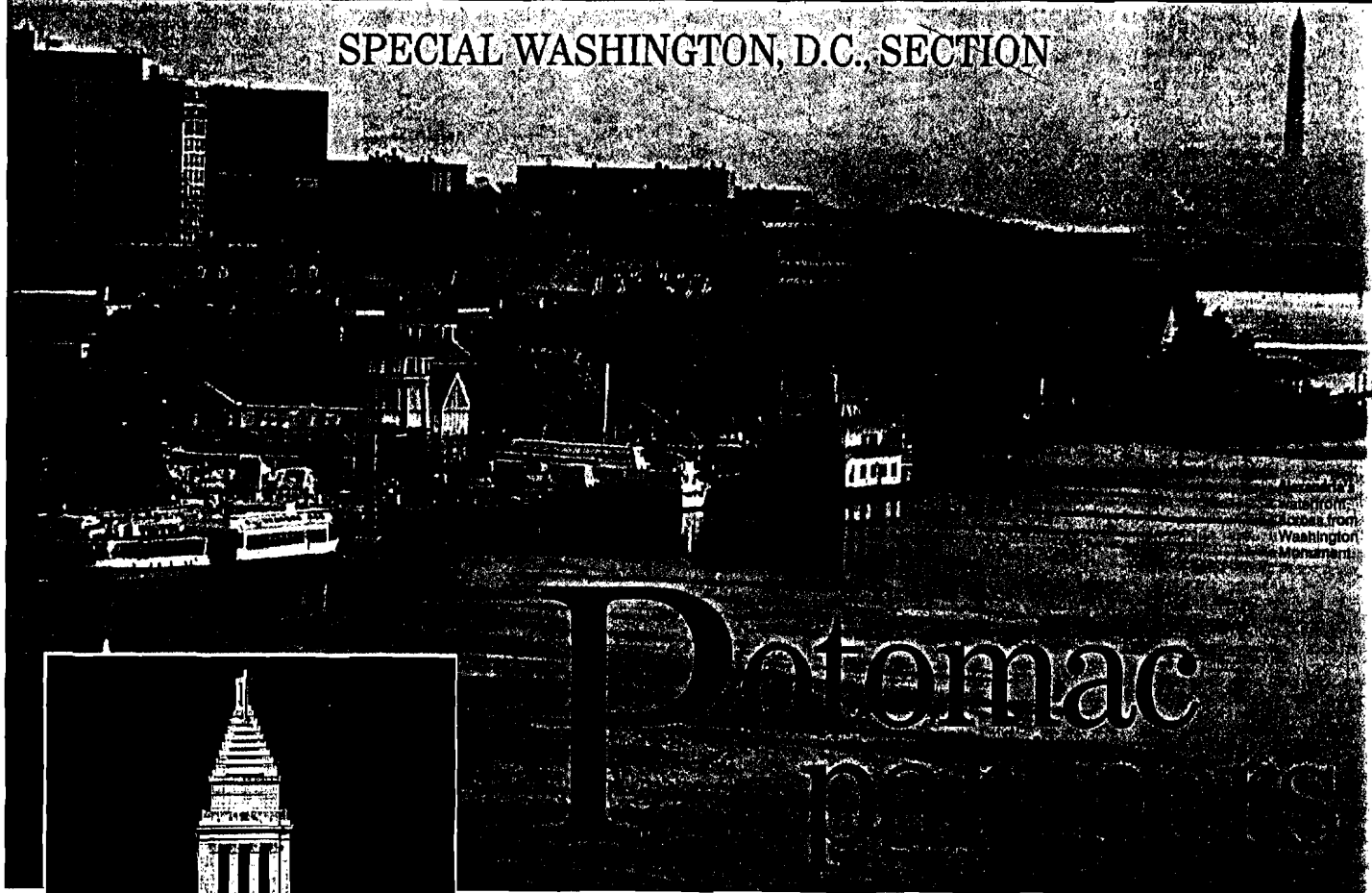
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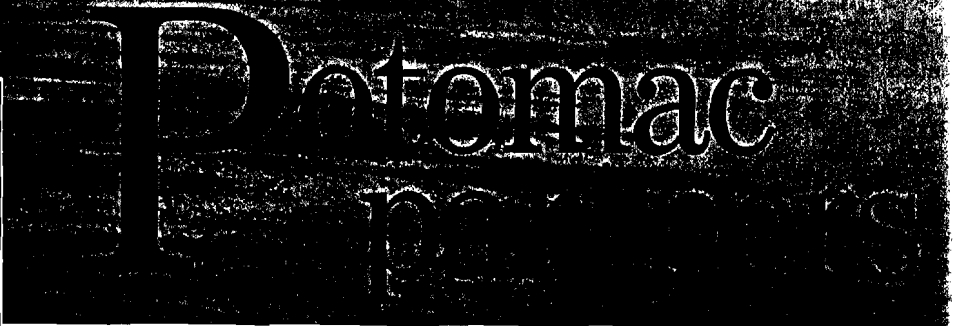
## SPECIAL WASHINGTON, D.C. SECTION



ARTHUR W. PIERSON / George Washington Masonic Memorial



Artifacts from the life of the first president are displayed at the 333-foot-tall George Washington Masonic Memorial, left. A 17-foot bronze statue of the "Father" greets 40,000 visitors a year.



ERIK KVALSVIK / Alexandria Convention & Visitors Association

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RICHARD NOWITZ / Alexandria Convention & Visitors Association

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See **ALEXANDRIA** on N4

In Old Town Alexandria, the heart of the historic district, dining at the Wharf.

# Potomac partners: Alexandria an

ALEXANDRIA from N1

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www.alexblackhistory.org

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**Carlyle House**  
121 N. Fairfax St.  
703-549-2997  
www.carlylehouse.org

Georgian-style stone mansion built by John Carlyle, a wealthy Scottish merchant and a founder of the city.

**Christ Church**  
118 N. Washington St.  
703-549-1450  
www.historicchristchurch.org

Oldest church in the city. See George Washington's box pew and the spot where Robert E. Lee was confirmed.

**Gadsby's Tavern Museum**  
134 N. Royal St.  
703-838-4242  
www.gadsbystavern.org

George Washington danced, and Thomas Jefferson celebrated his inauguration at this hotel and tavern that still serves food and drink — and gives tours.

**George Washington Masonic Memorial**  
101 Callahan Dr.  
703-683-2007  
www.gwmemorial.org



The annual Birthnight Ball in the famous ballroom of Gadsby's Tavern. Washington twice attended the event, which was held in his honor. Thomas Jefferson celebrated his inauguration at this hotel and tavern in 1801.



Gadsby's Tavern Museum

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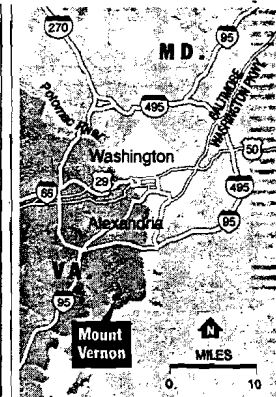
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The Washington and Lee families were customers of this family business. More than 8,000 medical-care items on display.

**Torpedo Factory Art Center**  
105 N. Union St.



SOURCES: ESRI; GDT The Philadelphia Inquirer

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Built in 1918 to make torpedoes, the warehouse-sized building houses 84 artists' studios, six galleries, the Art League School, and the Archaeology Museum.

**U.S. Patent & Trademark Office Museum**  
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### Places to stay

The only hotels in the Historic District are the **Holiday Inn Select Old Town** and the **Morrison House**.

Several major hotels are clustered in two spots, each about 10 blocks from the district. To the west, near the **King Street Metro** station, are an **Embassy Suites**, a **Fairfield**, a **Hilton** and a **Residence Inn by Marriott**. To the north are a **Best Western**, a **Holiday Inn Hotel & Suites**, a **Radisson**, and a **Sheraton Suites**. Most of them provide free shuttle service to the historic district.

### More information

**Ramsay House Visitors Center**  
221 King St.  
703-838-5005  
1-800-388-9119  
www.funside.com