It is likely that gingerbread was a favorite of the Washington and Custis families, because the women of these families passed down numerous recipes for the holiday treat. Martha Washington’s Booke of Cookery was a family heirloom passed down through her first husband’s family, the Custises. The book dates to as early as the 16th century, and contains multiple recipes for gingerbread. In 1799, Martha Washington gave the Booke of Cookery to her granddaughter, Eleanor “Nelly” Custis Lewis. Nelly, in turn, included no fewer than four recipes for gingerbread in her own collection of recipes, including some that she attributed to other women she knew.

The Washington family had a particularly special story associated with gingerbread. According to family legend, shortly before the battle of Yorktown the Marquis de Lafayette stopped in Fredericksburg, Virginia, to pay his respects to General Washington’s mother, Mary Ball Washington. During their visit, Mary served her famous gingerbread, which was in the form of a soft cake or loaf, rather than a cookie. According to the story, from then on the family referred to Mary Washington’s recipe as “Lafayette Gingerbread.”