

The Death of George Washington, 1799

George Washington finished his second term as the first President of the United States in 1797. Weary of the political infighting surrounding the presidency, he longed for the peace of retirement to his beloved Mount Vernon. Unfortunately, his solitude lasted less than three years as he died on December 14, 1799 at age 67.

Death of a Founding Father

George Washington Custis was the son of John Custis, the son of Martha Washington from her first marriage to Daniel Custis. George Washington Custis was thus Martha Washington's grandson. His father - John - served as an aide to George Washington and died from camp fever during the Battle of Yorktown in 1781. Washington immediately adopted the six-month-old Custis and his sister Eleanor as his own children. Custis lived at Mount Vernon and became the darling of the household.



Custis was nineteen at the time of Washington's death. He describes the scene:

"On the morning of the thirteenth, the general was engaged in making some improvements in the front of Mount Vernon. As was usual with him, he carried his own compass, noted his observations, and marked out the ground. The day became rainy, with sleet, and the improver remained so long exposed to the inclemency of the weather as to be considerably wetted before his return to the house. About one o'clock he was seized with chilliness and nausea, but having changed his clothes, he sat down to his indoor work - there being no moment of his time for which he had not provided an appropriate employment.

At night on joining his family circle, the general complained of a slight indisposition, and after a single cup of tea, repaired to his library, where he remained writing until between eleven and twelve o'clock. Mrs. Washington retired about the usual family hour, but becoming alarmed at not hearing the accustomed sound of the library door as it closed for the night, and gave signal for rest in the well-regulated mansion, she rose again, and continued sitting up, in much anxiety and suspense. At length the well-known step was heard on the stair, and upon the general's entering his chamber, the lady chided him for staying up so late, knowing him to be unwell, to which Washington made this memorably reply: 'I came so soon as my business was accomplished. You well know that through a long life, it has been my unvaried rule, never to put off till the morrow the duties which should be performed today.'



George Washington Custis

Having first covered the fire with care, the man of mighty labors sought repose; but it came not, as it long had been wont to do, to comfort and restore after the many and earnest occupations of the well-spent day. The night was passed in feverish restlessness and pain...The manly sufferer uttered no complaint, would permit no one to be disturbed in their rest on his account, and it was only at daybreak he would consent that the overseer might be called in, and bleeding resorted to. A vein was opened, but no relief afforded. Couriers were dispatched to Dr. Craik, the family, and Drs. Dick and Brown, the consulting physicians, all of whom came with speed. The proper remedies were administered, but without producing their healing effects; while the patient, yielding to the anxious

looks of all around him, waived his usual objections to medicines, and took those which were prescribed without hesitation or remark. The medical gentlemen spared not their skill, and all the resources of their art were exhausted in unwearied endeavors to preserve this noblest work of nature.

The night approached - the last night of Washington. The weather became severely cold while the group gathered nearer to the couch of the sufferer, watching with intense anxiety for the slightest dawning of hope. He spoke but little. To the respectful and affectionate inquiries of an old family servant, as she smoothed down his pillow, how he felt himself, he answered, 'I am very ill.' To Dr. Craik, his earliest companion-in-arms, longest tried and bosom friend, he observed, 'I am dying, sir - but am not afraid to die.' To Mrs. Washington he said, 'Go to my desk, and in the private drawer you will find two papers - bring them to me.' They were brought. He continued - 'These are my Wills - preserve this one and burn the other,' which was accordingly done. Calling to Colonel Lear, he directed - 'Let my corpse be kept for the usual period of three days.'

The patient bore his acute sufferings with fortitude and perfect resignation to the Divine will, while as the night advanced it became evident that he was sinking, and he seemed fully aware that 'his hour was nigh.' He inquired the time, and was answered a few minutes to ten. He spoke no more - the hand of death was upon him, and he was conscious that 'his hour was come.' With surprising self-possession he prepared to die. Composing his form at length, and folding his arms on his bosom, without a sigh, without a groan, the Father of his Country died. No pang or struggle told when the noble spirit took its noiseless flight; while so tranquil appeared the manly features in the repose of death, that some moments had passed ere those around could believe that the patriarch was no more."