

The Death of George Washington

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George Washington died on December 14, 1799. The 60-year-old former president was effectively asphyxiated over a two-day period. "I die hard," said Washington before he passed away. It was indeed a hard and painful death which Washington met with his usual stoicism.

Historian Peter R. Henriques wrote that Washington exhibited "many symptoms consistent with classic acute epiglottitis: Rapid onset of the disease, high fever, an extremely sore throat, drooling, great difficulty in swallowing, great difficulty in speaking without true hoarseness, increased airway obstruction, especially when leaning backward, a desire to assume a sitting position in spite of weakness, persistent restlessness, and finally an apparent improvement shortly before death....Washington slowly and painfully suffocated to death over many hours."

Washington had long anticipated his demise because most of his male relatives had died young. But he had survived the bullets of French and Indian warriors as a 22-year-old and he survived a malignant tumor on his leg as a 57-year-old president. While the nation trembled over his health, President Washington told his doctor: "Do not flatter me with vain hopes. I am not afraid to die, and therefore can hear the worst. I know that I am in the hands of a good Providence." The leader of the Continental Army lived and died with dignity. In September 1799, after he learned of the death of one of his brothers, Washington wrote: "When the summons comes I shall endeavour to obey it with a good grace."

On December 12, the master of Mount Vernon had spent five hours riding his farms in bad health. Washington had a strong constitution and was seemingly unaffected by the efforts. However, instead of changing his wet clothes, Washington went directly to dinner and conversation. Early the next morning a fevered Washington forbade his wife to seek assistance to light a fire -- because she herself had only recently recovered from a bout of illness.

Washington's acute sense of duty and respect for friends and family did not desert him even as his life was slipping away. He asked his wife Martha to bring him the two versions of his will. He selected one to save and one for her to burn. Washington had been meticulous in the collection and copying of his papers. He told his longtime secretary Tobias Lear: "Arrange & record all my late Military letters & papers -- arrange

my accounts & settle my books, as you know more about them than anyone else, and let Mr. Rawlins finish recording my other letters, which he has begun.”

Washington did not lack for the best medical care, but unfortunately for Washington that included “bleeding” him of nearly half his blood. Near death, Washington told his attending physician and longtime friend: “Doctor, I die hard; but I am not afraid to go; I believed from my first attack that I should not survive it; my breath can not last long.”

When told her husband was dead, Martha said: “Tis well. All is now over. I shall soon follow him and I shall rejoice when the moment arrives! I have no more trials to pass through.” The light was out of her life. She would survive just three years.

In his eulogy before Congress, John Marshall, the future chief justice, said of his friend: “However the public confidence may change, and the public affections fluctuate with respect to others, yet with respect to him they have, in war and in peace, in public and in private life, been as steady as his own firm mind, and as constant as his own exalted virtues.” Alexander Hamilton simply called him “The man of the age.”

First Lady Abigail Adams’ thoughts were contained in a private letter: “No Man ever lived, more deservedly beloved and Respected....When assailed by faction, when reviled by Party, he suffered with dignity, and Retired from exalted station with a Character which malice could not wound, nor envy tarnish.”

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