



Saturday Decr. 14, 1799

This day being marked by an event which will be memorable in the history of America, and perhaps of the world, I shall give a particular statement of it, to which I was an eye witness.

The last illness and Death of General Washington

On Thursday Decr. 12th, the General rode out to his farms about ten o'clock, and did not return home till past three. Soon after he went out the weather became very bad, rain, hail and snow falling alternately with a cold wind. When he came in, I carried some letters to him to frank, intending to send them to the Post office in the Evening. He franked the letters; but said the weather was too bad to send a servant to the Office that Evening.

I observed to him that I was afraid he had got wet; he said no, his great coat had kept him dry; but his neck appeared to be wet and the snow was hanging upon his hair. He came to dinner (which had been waiting for him) without changing his dress. In the evening he appeared as well as usual.

A heavy fall of snow took place on Friday, which prevented the general from riding out as usual. He had taken cold (undoubtedly from being so much exposed the day before) and complained of a sore throat: he however went out in the afternoon into the ground between the House and the River to mark some trees which were to be cut down in the improvements of that spot. He had a hoarseness, which increased in the evening; but he made light of it. In the evening the Papers were brought from the Post office, and he sat in the parlour, with Mrs. Washington & myself reading them till about nine o'clock when Mrs. W went up into Mrs. Lewis' room, who was confined in Child bed, and left the General & myself reading the papers. He was very cheerful, and when he met with anything interesting or entertaining, he read it aloud as well as his hoarseness would permit him.

He requested me to read to him the debates of the Virginia Assembly on the election of a Senator and a Governor; and on hearing Mr. Madison's observation respecting Mr. Monroe, he appeared much affected and spoke with some degree of asperity on the subject, which I endeavoured to moderate, as I always did on such occasions.

On his retiring I observed to him that he had better take something to remove his cold; He answered ["no; you know I never take anything for a cold. Let it go as it came."]



About 5 o'clock Dr. Craik came again into the Room & upon going to the bedside, the Genl. said to him, 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 will not last long.

The Doctor pressed his hand; but could not utter a word. He retired from the bedside & sat by the fire absorbed in grief.

Between 5 & 6 o'clock Dr. Dick & Dr. Brown come into the room and with Dr. Craik went to the bed; when Dr. Craik asked him if he could sit up in the bed. He held out his hand & I raised him up. He then said to the Physicians, "I feel myself going, I thank you for your attentions; but I pray you to take no more trouble about me, let me go off quietly; I cannot last long." They found that all which had been done was without effect; he laid down again, and all retired, excepting Dr. Craik. He continued in the same situation, uneasy & restless; but without complaining; frequently asking what hour it was. When I helped him to move at this time he did not speak; but looked at me with strong expressions of gratitude.

About 8 o'clock the Physicians came again into the room & applied blisters and cataplasms of wheat bran to his legs & feet; after which they went out (except Dr. Craik) without a ray of hope.

I went out about this time and wrote a line to Mr. Law & Mr. Peters, requesting them to come with their wives (Mrs. Washington's granddaughters) as soon as possible to Mt. Vernon.

About ten o'clock he made several attempts to speak to me before he could effect it, at length he said, "I am just going! Have me decently buried; and do not let my body be put into the vault in less than three days after I am dead." I bowed assent, for I could not speak. He then looked at me again and said, "Do you understand me?" I replied yes! "Tis well" said he.

About ten minutes before he expired (which was between ten & eleven o'clock) he [sic] breathing became easier; he lay quietly; he withdrew his hand from mine, and felt his own pulse. I saw his countenance change. I spoke to Dr. Craik, who sat by the fire; he came to the bedside. The General's hand fell from his wrist. I took it in mine and put it into my bosom. Dr. Craik put his hand over his Eyes and he expired without a struggle or a sigh!

Transcription of Excerpt from Tobias Lear's Journal, documenting death of George Washington 1799

Transcription by: Lee Arnold

Record No. 419



While we were fixed in silent grief, Mrs. Washington (who was sitting at the foot of the bed) asked, with a firm & collected voice, Is he gone? I could not speak; but held up my hand as a signal that he was no more. "Tis well, said she in the same voice. All is now over, I shall soon follow him! I have no more trials to pass through!

Tobias Lear

New Hampshire's Tobias Lear was on the scene during the long slow death of President George Washington at Mount Vernon. His detailed and carefully written account offers a detailed view of Washington's last moments. This writing may be secretary Tobias Lear's finest moment.