

## WASHINGTON'S LAST DAYS ON EARTH.

As recounted in Washington Irving's *The Life of George Washington* (1855-1859), vol IV, chapter XXXIV (here abridged.)

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### CHAPTER XXXIV.

WINTER had now set in, with occasional wind and rain and frost, yet Washington still kept up his active round of in-door and out-door avocations, as his diary records. He was in full health and vigor, dined out occasionally, and had frequent guests at Mount Vernon, and, as usual, was part of every day in the saddle, going the rounds of his estates, and, in his military phraseology, "visiting the outposts..."

..."My greatest anxiety," said he on a previous occasion, "is to have all these [Mount Vernon property] concerns in such a clear and distinct form, that no reproach may attach itself to me when I have taken my departure for the land of spirits." It was evident, however, that full of health and vigor, he looked forward to his long-cherished hope, the enjoyment of a serene old age in this home of his heart...

According to his diary, the morning on which these voluminous instructions to his steward were dated was clear and calm, but the afternoon was lowering. The next day (11th [Dec. 1799]), he notes that there was wind and rain, and "at night a large circle round the moon. The morning of the 12th was overcast..."

About ten o'clock he mounted his horse, and rode out as usual to make the rounds of the estate. The ominous ring round the moon, which he had observed on the preceding night, proved a fatal portent. "About one o'clock," he notes, "it began to snow, soon after to hail, and then turned to a settled cold rain." Having on an over-coat, he continued his ride without regarding the weather, and did not return to the house until after three. His secretary approached him with letters to be franked, that they might be taken to the post-office in the evening. Washington franked the letters, but observed, that the weather was too bad to send a servant out with them. Mr. Lear perceived that snow was hanging from his hair, and expressed fears that he had got wet; but he replied, "No, his great-coat had kept him dry." As dinner had been waiting for him he sat down to table without changing his dress. "In the evening," writes his secretary, "he appeared as well as usual."

On the following morning [Dec. 14<sup>th</sup>] the snow was three inches deep and still falling, which prevented him from taking his usual ride. He complained of a sore throat, and had evidently taken cold the day before. In the afternoon the weather cleared up, and he went out on the grounds between the house and the river, to mark some trees which were to be cut down. A hoarseness which had hung about him through the day grew worse towards night, but he made light of it. He was very cheerful in the evening, as he sat in the parlor with Mrs. Washington and Mr. Lear, amusing himself with the papers which had

been brought from the post-office. When he met with any thing interesting or entertaining, he would read it aloud as well as his hoarseness would permit, or he listened and made occasional comments, while Mr. Lear read the debates of the Virginia Assembly.

On retiring to bed, Mr. Lear suggested that he should take something to relieve the cold. "No," replied he, "you know I never take any thing for a cold. Let it go as it came." In the night he was taken extremely ill with ague and difficulty of breathing. Between two and three o'clock in the morning he awoke Mrs. Washington, who would have risen to call a servant, but he would not permit her, lest she should take cold. At daybreak, when the servant woman entered to make a fire she was sent to call Mr. Lear. He found the general breathing with difficulty, and hardly able to utter a word intelligibly. Washington desired that Dr. Craik, who lived in Alexandria, should be sent for, and that in the mean time Rawlins, one of the overseers, should be summoned, to bleed him before the doctor could arrive.

A gargle was prepared for his throat, but when ever he attempted to swallow any of it, he was convulsed and almost suffocated. Rawlins made his appearance soon after sunrise, but when the general's arm was ready for the operation, became agitated. "Don't be afraid," said the general, as well as he could speak. Rawlins made an incision. "The orifice is not large enough," said Washington. The blood, however, ran pretty freely, and Mrs. Washington, uncertain whether the treatment was proper, and fearful that too much blood might be taken, begged Mr. Lear to stop it. When he was about to untie the string the general put up his hand to prevent him, and as soon as he could speak murmured, "more—more; "but Mrs. Washington's doubts prevailed, and the bleeding was stopped, after about half a pint of blood had been taken. External applications were now made to the throat, and his feet were bathed in warm water, but without affording any relief. His old friend, Dr. Craik, arrived between eight and nine, and two other physicians, Drs. Dick and Brown, were called in. Various remedies were tried, and additional bleeding, but all of no avail.

"About half-past four o'clock [p.m.]," writes Mr. Lear," he desired me to call Mrs. Washington to his bedside, when he requested her to go down into his room and take from his desk two wills, which she would find there, and bring them to him, which she did. Upon looking at them, he gave her one, which he observed was useless, as being superseded by the other, and desired her to burn it, which she did, and took the other and put it into her closet.

"After this was done, I returned to his bedside and took his hand. He said to me: "I find I am going: my breath cannot last long. I believed from the first, that the disorder would prove fatal. Do you arrange and record all my late military letters and papers. Arrange my accounts and settle my books, as you know more about them than any one else; and let Mr. Rawlins finish recording my other letters which he has begun." I told him this should be done. He then asked if I recollected any thing which it was essential for him to do, as he had but a very short time to continue with us. I told him that I could recollect nothing; but that I hoped he was not so near his end.

“He observed, smiling, that he certainly was, and that, as it was the debt which we must all pay, he looked to the event with perfect resignation.” In the course of the afternoon he appeared to be in great pain and distress from the difficulty of breathing, and frequently changed his posture in the bed. Mr. Lear endeavored to raise him and turn him with as much ease as possible. “I am afraid I fatigue you too much,” the general would say. Upon being assured to the contrary, “Well,” observed he gratefully, “it is a debt we must pay to each other, and I hope when you want aid of this kind you will find it.” His servant, Christopher, had been in the room during the day, and almost the whole time on his feet. The general noticed it in the afternoon, and kindly told him to sit down.

About five o’clock [p.m.] his old friend, Dr. Craik, came again into the room, and approached the bedside. “Doctor,” said the general, “I die hard, but I am not afraid to go. I believed, from my first attack, that I should not survive it—my breath cannot last long.” The doctor pressed his hand in silence, retired from the bedside, and sat by the fire absorbed in grief. Between five and six the other physicians came in, and he was assisted to sit up in his bed. “I feel I am going,” said he; “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.” He lay down again; all retired excepting Dr. Craik. The general continued uneasy and restless, but without complaining, frequently asking what hour it was. Further remedies were tried without avail in the evening. He took whatever was offered him, did as he was desired by the physicians, and never uttered sigh or complaint.

“About ten o’clock [p.m.],” writes Mr. Lear, “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 and eleven o’clock) his 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 pressed it to my bosom. Dr. Craik put his hands over his eyes, and he expired without a struggle or a sigh. “While we were fixed in silent grief, Mrs. Washington, who was seated at the foot of the bed, asked with a firm and 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...”