



In 1796 by Gilbert Stuart; from "The Athenaeum portrait," National Gallery, Washington, D.C.

THE MOTHER OF HER COUNTRY

If George Washington is, as undoubtedly most will agree, the *Father* of his country, his wife Martha (or "Patsy" as she was known to her husband and intimate adult acquaintances) stands as a very reasonable candidate for its *Mother*. Bold and progressive Abigail Adams or intellectual and artistic Mercy Otis Warren are pointed to, and in understandable retrospect, as the most exemplary women of their generation. And yet it was such as Martha Washington (1731-1802) who were more typical of the mothers and wives of the men who fought and founded the country. After doing some reading, among the first things one comes to learn about Martha is how extremely well cared for her husband was. Ever dutiful and hard working Martha lived the greater part her life assiduously caring for him, her children (by a prior marriage with Daniel Parke Custis), and, later, her adopted grandchildren. Had Washington, in his role as commander and chief and later President, been a bachelor or had had a less supportive and hard working spouse as he did, it seems extremely probable he would have ended up being half the man he proved to be in those roles. For as much as anything else in his own life, Washington lived for home and the happiness of home, and Martha, or so it seems, was essential to that happiness. Of course, it is perhaps easy now for some to make light of or smile at Martha and her old fashioned ways and dated deportment, and yet how abundantly rich and empowered others were others made as a result of her looking out for and mothering them. And, again, when you come to learn the facts and her story, you realize, saying so is no mere platitude or exaggeration.

She could admittedly at times be temperamental, tartly opinionated, sarcastic, fussy in trifles, and an unwavering martinet with her charges. Yet what comes across as more characteristic of her personality was a deeply loving and genuinely caring disposition that made her such a uniquely effective wife and mother. She also had it in her to be funny, both intentionally and unintentionally, and this is one interesting side of her that tends to be overlooked. If then George Washington, as much as anything else, wished for a happy home, he evidently had just the right and suitable wife, for him, to make that possible, and the more we learn about Martha, the we become better acquainted with and better understand her husband. At bottom, both were in some ways childlike, even naïve, in their outlooks, joys and affections, and yet they were also natural, sincere, and possessed of uncommon wisdom, empathy, and a profound (if less than perfect) understanding of human nature; as evinced by their great and usual success in dealing with others -- and *so many* of such at that.

There has been much debate over the decades, now centuries, about quite what religious faith George Washington followed. That he had one is not in dispute. The question rather is whether or not he was a Christian -- properly speaking. Two very good books on the subject I found are *George Washington the Christian* (1919) by William J. Johnson and the recent *In the Hands of a Good Providence: Religion in the Life of George Washington* (2008) by Mary V. Thompson. The former, though it has the regrettable defect of occasionally quoting Parson Weems as a source, is otherwise well-documented and presents strong evidence that Washington was indeed and *at heart* a Christian, and not a mere posturing Deist. Mary V. Thompson's is more impartial, and up to date as an exercise in scholarship, and yet she as well is inclined to support the case for Washington as a Christian. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to delve closely into the question, a few remarks are not inappropriate. Some have protested that if Washington was truly a Christian, why didn't he invoke the name of Jesus in his writings and speeches? For one thing, it is an indisputable fact that very few of the apostolic Fathers, the church Fathers, or later doctors of the church, such as Aquinas, rarely if ever used the name of Jesus in their writings, and instead speak more often and simply of "God." And when they do speak of Jesus, he is referred to more in the theological abstract as "Christ" or "the Son." In other words, to read their works, one *might* be lead to conclude that Jesus of Nazareth was and is Christ and the Son is almost a mere incidental and trivial point. I wouldn't put words in their mouths, yet rightly or wrongly, their writings give this impression. Part of the reason for this reticence, and Washington's own, may have been a desire to be diplomatic and, as well perhaps, to avoid potential controversy with unbelievers whom they wished to persuade or convert. Almost certainly and in any case, this appears to have been part of Washington's approach, and whom we otherwise find to have been a strict and impassioned moralist in his precepts; who attended church, including those of differing Christian denominations, and regularly for most of his life; who advocated and ordered days of fasting, prayer and thanksgiving, and who continually expressed faith, hope, and reliance in and on Providence and the Creator.

Yet though doubts and questions might be reasonably raised as to quite what Washington's orthodoxy consisted of, or for that matter who agrees and whose orthodoxy decides who is and who isn't a Christian, there can be no question that his wife was as pious and devout enough to please even the most skeptical on this point. So that certainly his being a mere academic Deist or theological abstractionist; when Martha who was such a dedicated and punctual church goer all her life and with whom both Washington and his domestic felicity were inseparable, seems exceedingly doubtful.

Prayer and Bible reading were a regular routine of Martha's busy life, as Washington's wife and as joint overseer of Mount Vernon and its numerous dependents and domestics. Prayer, as might be surmised, is much like physical exercise. One gets out of it what one puts into it; while taking such up lightly and or sporadically is bound to produce negligible or no worthwhile results. And just as regular, long term, and disciplined physical exercise strengthen the body and maintains its health; so too the same can be said of prayer in regard to the soul. The power and efficacy of prayer and faith in Martha's life is, one is inclined to infer, tellingly revealed in the singular endurance and vigor she demonstrated in light of the many personal tragedies and close family losses she suffered in the course of her life. When, for instance, most Americans could celebrate the victory at Yorktown and the coming of the end of the long conflict, Martha at that time was left mourning the death of her only surviving son Jacky; having earlier been made bereft of a teenager daughter and two other children, of three and four years of age respectively. In all, she had been a widow and mother of four children; all of whom passed away when they were young or else scarcely older than infants. And yet it was this same Martha who, in a letter of Dec. 1789 to Mercy Otis Warren, stated "I am still determined to be cheerful and to be happy in whatever situation I may be, for I have also learnt from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends upon our dispositions, and not upon our circumstances. We carry the seeds of the one or the other about with us in our minds wherever we go."

Both Washington and Martha were early risers, typically getting up at four in the morning for purposes of getting a head start on the day. What with the varied and immense tasks invariably before them such was only fitting. In Martha's case, and in addition to her scheduled devotions, she was busy as a seamstress and knitter; as mother attending to and instructing her grandchildren (Jacky's son and daughter); mistress to and overseer of her household, guests, slaves; cook; bookkeeper; hostess; with time sometimes allotted for playing the spinet and harpsichord. During the war, she was frequently at camp with her husband, including sewing, darning, and knitting for soldiers in the winter at Valley Forge. Washington's own personal "Life-Guard" were sometimes detached to protect Mrs. Washington; so that at times she might be seen, along with her attendants, being escorted by a squad of dragoons.¹ After the war, of course, she acted as *the first* First Lady, and despite the protestations of the Jeffersonians at the too seeming regality of President Washington's convivial receptions, really, by way of Martha's presence one could hardly have found a more unpretentious and earthy hospitality and presence in such gatherings than when she was present.

In the way of presenting some miniature portraits of Martha Washington, I have selected an assortment of unusual, if sometimes quaint and domestic, scenes and moments from the middle to late period of her life; including a few extracts from letters (while retaining her sometimes odd or antiquated spelling of certain words.) Most of these come from 19th century publications, but such that are even so well done and reasonably reliable; so that in all, and by way of these gleanings, we get, a better idea of Martha and that bring to life and fill with color the hagiographic stereotype.

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If, in the few of Mrs. Washington's letters that remain, we miss the brilliancy and vivacity that distinguish those of Mrs. Adams, we find an equally keen and intelligent interest in the events of the time. In writing from Cambridge, January 31, 1776, she says:

"My Dear Sister, -- I have wrote to you several times in hopes that would put you in mind of me, but I find it has not had its intended affect and I am really very uneasy at not hearing from you and have made all the excuses for you that I can think of, but it will not doe much longer, if I doe not get a letter by this night's post, I shall think myself quite forgot by all my Friends. The distance is long yet the post comes regularly every week.

The General, myself, and [son] Jack are very well Nelly Custis is I hope getting well again. ...hope noe accident will happen to her in going back, -- I have not thought much about it yet god knows where we shall be I suppose there will be a change soon, but how, I cannot pretend to say. A few days ago Gen. [Sir Henry] Clinton [Gen. Sir William Howe was actually in command of the British at that time], with several companyes sailed out of Boston Harbor, to what place distant for, we cannot find out. Some think it is to Virginia he is gon others to New York -- they have been kept in Boston so long that I suppose they will be glad to seek for a place where they may have more room, as they cannot get out any way hear but by water -- our navy<sup>2</sup> has been very successful in taking thair vessels two was taken last week loded with coles [coals?] and potatoes, wines & several other articles for the use of the troops -- If Gen. Clinton is gon to New York, -- Gen [Charles] Lee is there before him, and I hope will give him a very warm reception -- was sent thare some time ago to have matters put in proper order in case any disturbance should happen, as thare are many Tories in that part of the world, or at least many are suspected there to be very unfriendly to our cause at this time --

winter [sic] here been remarkably mild. The Rivers has never been frozen hard enough to walk upon the Ice since I came heer, My dear sister, be so good as to remember me to all enquireing friends -- give my Duty to my mama, and love to my brothers and sisters Mr. Bassett, your Dear Children and self -- in which the General, Jack and Nelly, join me.

I am, my dear Nancy  
Your ever affectionate sister,  
Martha Washington."<sup>3</sup>

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The recollections of a veteran still living at Manchester, Massachusetts, at the age of ninety-two, bear testimony to the kindness of Mrs. Washington towards those in the humblest sphere. One little incident occurred when she came to spend the cold season with her husband in winter-quarters. There were but two frame-houses in the settlement, and neither had a finished upper story. The General was contented with his rough dwelling, but wished to prepare for his wife a more retired and comfortable apartment. He

¹ Baylor's cavalry was at one point employed at part of the mounted arm of the Life-Guard, and at the time of their doing so were called "Lady Washington's Dragoons."

² [Edit. An American galley was named "Lady Washington;" which from 1776 and up to 1777 captured some dozen prizes in and around New York City and the Hudson River.]

³ Anne Hollingsworth Wharton, *Martha Washington* (1897), pp. 102-103.

sent for the young mechanic, and desired him and one of his fellow-apprentices to fit up a room in the upper story for the accommodation of Lady Washington through the winter. She herself arrived before the work was commenced. "She came," says the narrator, "into the place -- a portly-looking, agreeable woman of forty-five, and said to us: 'Now, young men, I care for nothing but comfort here; and should like you to fit me up a beauffet [buffet or sideboard] on one side of the room, and some shelves and places for hanging clothes on the other.' We went to work with all our might. Every morning about eleven Mrs. Washington came up stairs with a glass of spirits for each of us; and after she and the General had dined, we were called down to eat at their table. We worked very hard, nailing smooth boards over the rough and worm-eaten planks, and stopping the crevices in the walls made by time and hard usage. Then we consulted together how we could smooth the uneven floor, and take out, or cover over some of the huge black knots. We studied to do every thing to please so pleasant a lady, and to make some return in our humble way for the kindness of the General. On the fourth day, when Mrs. Washington came up to see how we were getting along, we had finished the work, made the shelves, put up the pegs on the wall, built the beauffet, and converted the rough garret into a comfortable apartment. As she stood looking round, I said, 'Madam, we have endeavored to do the best we could; I hope we have suited you.' She replied, smiling, 'I am astonished! your work would do honor to an old master, and you are mere lads. I am not only satisfied, but highly gratified with what you have done for my comfort.'" As the old soldier repeated these words, the tears ran down his furrowed cheeks. The thrill of delight which had seventy years before penetrated his heart at the approving words of his General's lady, again animated his worn frame, sending back his thoughts to the very moment and scene.⁴

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In November, 1778, Mrs. Washington wrote from Mount Vernon to Mr. Bartholomew Dandridge: --  
"Dear Brother, -- I received your kind favor by Mr. Posey and should have wrote to you long before this but have every day expected Jack would be ready to set out.

I Am very sorry to hear that my mamma has been so unwell and thank god that she has recovered again. I wish I was near enough to come to see you and her.

I am very uneasy at this time -- I have some reason to expect that I shall take another trip to the northward -- the pore Geneeral is not likely to come to see us from what I can see hear -- I expect to hear seertainly by the next post -- if I doe I shall write to you to inform you and my Friends -- if I am so happy to stay at home -- I shall hope to see you with my sisters hear as soon as you are at leasure.

Please to give little Patty a kiss for me I have sent her a pair of shoes -- there was not a doll to be got in the City of Philadelphia or I would have sent her one (the shoes are in a bundle for my mamma) I am very glad to hear that you and your family are well -- I cannot tell you more news than I can I have had no letter since he came from the camp -- by some neglect of the post master my letters does not come regularly to hand. I am with my Duty to my mamma my Love to my sister Aylett -- my sister and family and my dear Brother Your Eaver affectionate  
M Washington<sup>5</sup>

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When Washington turned his horses' heads homeward, he and his wife were escorted by several of his staff officers, and by the Governor of Maryland, William Paca, who accompanied them as far as the South River. The little party passed the night at Queen Anne, dined the next day at Alexandria, and on the evening of Christmas reached Mount Vernon. The delight of the servants, who came forth to meet the beloved master and mistress absent from them so much during the eight years' war, can be better imagined than described. Bishop, now old and silver-haired, came out to the roadside, leaning on his staff, to greet the commander whose youthful triumphs he had witnessed, while his pretty daughter pressed forward to make her best courtesy to Madam, who, as Bishop was proud to say, had "as good as brought up the girl." Some guests from Fredericksburg were in the Mansion House ready to receive the travellers. *A feu de joie* was kept up by the men-servants during the evening, with guns and pistols, which, with the sound of the fiddle and banjo from the negroes' quarters and the happiness of all hearts, made the evening a merry one. The next day many neighbors called to welcome the Washingtons to their home, while the servants on the estate ushered in the holiday week by appearing in their best clothes to wish them a "Merrie Christmas," and to receive their "Christmas box," from the hands of a mistress who never forgot them. One of the young ladies from Fredericksburg staying in the house wrote to a friend [a "Miss Lewis" states Lossing] of this Christmas: --

"I must tell you what a charming day I spent at Mount Vernon with Mama and Sally. The Gen'l and Madame came home on Christmas Eve, and such a racket the Servants made, for they were glad of their coming! Three handsome young Officers came with them. All Christmas afternoon people came to pay their Respects and Duty. Among them were stately Dames and gay young Women. The Gen'l seemed very happy, and Mistress Washington was from Daybrake making everything as agreeable as possible for Everybody."⁶

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...[W]hen the General had no serious questions under consideration, and was at leisure to enjoy the social side of life, Mrs. Washington encouraged the young people in the house to draw him into their pleasures. Nelly Custis, who never seems to have stood in awe of her adopted father, delighted in after life to tell her children and grandchildren how much he enjoyed the society of young people, and how heartily he would often laugh over some merry school-girl prank of hers or her companions. Another person who does not seem to have felt the restraint in the presence of Washington, which has been so much dwelt upon, was Henry Lee, a frequent and favorite guest at Mount Vernon. The General, while Lee was dining with him one day, said that he wanted a pair of carriage horses, and asked Lee if he knew where he could get them.

"I have a fine pair, General," replied Lee, "but you cannot get them."

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth F. Ellet, *Women of the Revolution*, vol. 2 (1818), pp. 15-17.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Hollingsworth Wharton, *Martha Washington* (1897), pp. 127-128.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Hollingsworth Wharton, *Martha Washington* (1897), pp. 152-153.

“Why not?”

“Because you will never pay more than half price for anything; and I must have full price for my horses.”

This bantering reply set Mrs. Washington to laughing, and the parrot perched beside her joined in the laugh. The General, taking this assault upon his dignity in good part, said, “Ah, Lee, you are a funny fellow. See! That bird is laughing at you.”<sup>7</sup>

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Mr. Hunter seems by some means to have won the confidence of his hostess, perhaps by assuring her of what he recorded in his diary, that the situation of Mount Vernon was the sweetest in the world, as she talked to him with great freedom especially of her army experience. “It is astonishing,” he wrote, “with what raptures Mrs. Washington spoke about the discipline of the army, the excellent order they were in, -- superior to any troops, she said, upon the face of the earth towards the close of the war; even the English acknowledged it she said. What pleasure she took in the sound of the fifes and drums, preferring it to any music that was ever heard!”⁸

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For some reason, whether from ill health or homesickness, or in consequence of the exactions of official life, she does not seem to have been happy during the early part of her stay in New York [as First Lady]. This fact can only be gathered from Mrs. Washington’s home letters, as her thorough breeding enabled her to conceal her distaste for the restraints of her life, and to perform her duties as hostess with unflinching courtesy. To Mrs. James Warren [Mercy Otis Warren] she wrote at length upon the subject; and after dwelling upon her own and the General’s deep appreciation of daily recurring proofs of the nation’s confidence in and devotion to him, she added:

“The consciousness of having attempted to do all the good in his power, and the pleasure of finding his fellow-citizens so well satisfied with the disinterestedness of his conduct, will doubtless be some compensation for the great Sacrifices which I know he has made...With respect to myself, I sometimes think the arrangement is not quite as it ought to have been, that I, who had much rather be at home, should occupy a place with which a great many younger and gayer women would be extremely pleased. As my grandchildren and domestic connections make up a great portion of the felicity which I looked for in this world, I shall hardly be able to find any substitute that will indemnify me for the loss of such endearing society. I do not say this because I feel dissatisfied with my present station, for everybody and everything conspire to make me as content as possible in it; yet I have learned too much of the vanity of human affairs to expect felicity from the scenes of public life.

“I am still determined to be cheerful and happy in whatever situation I may be, for I have also learned from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends on our dispositions and not on our circumstances. We carry the seeds of the one or the other about with us in our minds wherever we go.

“I have two of my grandchildren with me, who enjoy advantages, in point of education, and who, I trust, by the goodness of Providence, will be a great blessing to me.”

This letter, which was either dictated by Mrs. Washington or carefully edited before it appeared in print, as it contains none of the homely characteristic phrases to be found in her other letters, doubtless represents truly and fairly her feelings with regard to the life opening before her. Duty rather than inclination was its inspiring motive. To do honor to the high position occupied by her husband, to exact a proper respect toward herself as his wife, caused this simple-hearted and retiring woman to give considerable time and thought to forms and ceremonies.

Some expressions in another letter, written to her “dear Fanny,” Mrs. George Augustine Washington, soon after the President’s serious illness, when he had left New York to make his Eastern tour, have been quoted to prove that Mrs. Washington was discontented and complaining at this time. The simple little letter, full of messages to her Virginia relatives, certainly has in it a note of homesickness, which does not seem strange when we realize that this country-bred woman was spending her first summer in town, and while her husband was away from her must often have been lonely in the midst of many people.

“New York, October the 22nd 1789.

My Dear Fanny, -- I have by Mrs. Sims sent for a watch it is one of the cargoe that I have so often mentioned to you, that was expected, I hope is such a one as will please you -- it is of the newest fashion, if that has any influence on your taste [...] Mrs. Sims will give you a better account of the fashions than I can. I live a very dull life here and know nothing that passes in the town -- I never goe to any publick place -- indeed I think I am more like a state prisoner than anything else, there is certain bounds set for me which I must not depart from -- and as I cannot doe as I like I am obstinate and stay at home a great deal.

The President set out this day week on a tour to the eastward, Mr. Lear and Major Jackson attended him. My dear children has very bad colds but thank god they are getting better. My love and good wishes attend you and all with you. Remember me to Mr. and Mrs. L. W. How is the poor child -- kiss Maria I send her two little handkerchiefs to wipe her nose.

Adieu

I am my dear Fanny yours most affectionately

M Washington”<sup>9</sup>

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Many of the Revolutionary veterans were living in 1790, and, by their presence, gave a dignified tone and character to all public assemblages; and when you saw a peculiarly fine looking soldier in those old days, and would ask, “to what corps of the American army did you belong?” drawing himself up to his full height, with a martial air, and back of the hand thrown up to his forehead, the veteran would reply, “[Washington’s] Life-Guard, your honor.”

⁷ Anne Hollingsworth Wharton, *Martha Washington* (1897), pp. 162-163.

⁸ Anne Hollingsworth Wharton, *Martha Washington* (1897), p. 170. [Footnote in original] “*Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*,” vol. xvii. p. 76.

⁹ Anne Hollingsworth Wharton, *Martha Washington* (1897), pp. 202-206.

And proud and happy were these veterans in again beholding their own good *Lady Washington*. Greatly was she beloved in the army. Her many intercessions with the chief for the pardon of offenders, and her kindness to the sick and wounded, caused her annual arrival in camp to be hailed as an event that would serve to dissipate the gloom of the winter-quarters.¹⁰

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[Appearing as a footnote by Benson J. Lossing in G. W. Parke Custis' text]

Mr. Wansey, an English traveller, who published an account of his *Excursion in the United States*, in 1795, says, that the democrats "objected to these drawing-rooms of Mrs. Washington, as tending to give her a super-eminency, and as introductory to the paraphernalia of courts." After quoting this, Dr. Griswold, in his *Republican Court*, remarks: "With what feelings the excellent woman regarded these democrats is shown by an anecdote of the same period. She was a severe disciplinarian, and Nelly Custis was not often permitted by her to be idle, or to follow her own caprices. The young girl was compelled to practise at the harpsichord four or five hours every day, and one morning, when she should have been playing, her grandmother entered the room, remarking that she had not heard the music, and also that she had observed some person going out, whose name she would very much like to know. Nelly was silent, and suddenly her attention was arrested by a blemish on the wall, which had been newly painted a delicate cream color. 'Ah! it was no federalist,' she exclaimed, looking at the spot just above a settee; 'none but a filthy democrat would mark a place with his good-for-nothing head in that manner!'"

Samuel York Atlee, Esq. of Washington city, called the attention of Mr. [G.W. Parke] Custis to this statement, when the venerable author of these Recollections, in a letter to that gentleman, on the 29th of December, 1854, remarked :--

"As to the story of Nelly Custis, my sister, practising very long and very unwillingly at the harpsichord, that part of the *tale of Wansey* is true. The poor girl would play and cry, and cry and play, for long hours, under the immediate eye of her grandmother, a rigid disciplinarian in all things.

"As to the absurd details that chronicle a saying of Mrs. Washington, touching democrats, no one, my dear sir, who knew that venerable lady, or who had ever heard of her, will believe a word of it. As the esteemed Lady Washington of the army of Independence, or the Lady-president of later days, Mrs. Washington was remarkable for her affable and dignified manners, and her courteous and kindly demeanor to all who approached her. Again, it is notorious that the politicians and statesmen of both parties were equally well and kindly received at the president[ial] mansion, where were welcomed Mr. Gallatin, Mr. Giles, and others of the chiefs of the democratic party, as well as Mr. Ames, Mr. Sedgwick, and others of the federalists.

"I can, with great truth, aver that, in the whole period of the first presidency, I never heard Mrs. Washington engage in any political controversy, or, indeed, *touch on the subject of politics at all* [...]"<sup>11</sup>

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The final departure of President and Mrs. Washington from the place and power through which they had acquired so much personal honor, and conferred such lasting benefit upon their country, was distinguished by every manifestation of national and individual reverence and gratitude.

All mourned the retirement of the great and good Father of his Country, from the immediate supervision to which all might so safely and implicitly trust; and the love and blessings of a nation followed both Mrs. Washington and its honored Chief to the well-earned tranquillity of private life.

Many were the tender farewells of those who were to be forever officially separated, and many the parting tokens of remembrance and affection long preserved as the sacred mementoes of those patriarchal days.

Mrs. Washington's part in these touching adieux will be characteristically illustrated by the following pleasing anecdote, for which we are obliged to a gentleman who personally received it from the most authentic source: --

"On leaving the Seat of Government after the inauguration of his successor [John Adams], Washington presented to all his principal officers some token of regard. When Mrs. Oliver Wolcott, the wife of one of these gentlemen, and the particular friend and correspondent of Miss Custis, called 'to take leave,' Mrs. Washington asked if she did not wish a memorial of the General. 'Yes,' replied Mrs. Wolcott, 'I should like a lock of his hair.' Mrs. Washington instantly took her scissors, and with a happy smile, cut a large lock from her husband's head, added to it one from her own, and presented them to her fair-friend."¹²

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"I Cannot tell you, my dear friend," wrote Mrs. Washington to Mrs. Knox soon after her return to Mount Vernon, "how much I enjoy *home* after having been deprived of one so long, for our dwelling in New York and Philadelphia was not *home*, only a sojourning. The General and I feel like children just released from school or from a hard taskmaster, and we believe that nothing can tempt us to leave the sacred roof tree again, except on private business or pleasure. We are so penurious with our enjoyment that we are loath to share it with any one but dear friends, yet almost every day some stranger claims a portion of it, and we cannot refuse. Nelly and I are companions. Washington [G. W. P. Custis] is yet at Princeton and doing well. Mrs. Law and Mrs. Peter are often with us, and my dear niece Fanny Washington, who is a widow, lives at Alexandria only a few miles from us. Our furniture and other things sent us from Philadelphia arrived safely, our plate we brought with us in the carriage. How many dear friends I have left behind! They fill my memory with sweet thoughts. Shall I ever see them again? Not likely unless they shall come to me here, for the twilight is gathering around our lives. I am again fairly settled down to the pleasant duties of an old-fashioned Virginia house-keeper, steady as a clock, busy as a bee, and cheerful as a cricket."

This letter was evidently dictated by Mrs. Washington, or written for her by her husband, as were most of her letters at this time. Writing seems to have become more and more of a burden to her, and the General, whose pen never rested, often relieved his wife of this task, even in her correspondence with intimate friends.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> George Washington Parke Custis, *Recollections and Private Memoirs of Washington* (1860), edited by Benson J. Lossing, p. 403.

<sup>11</sup> George Washington Parke Custis, *Recollections and Private Memoirs of Washington* (1860), edited by Benson J. Lossing, pp. 408-409.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret C. Conkling, *Memoirs of the Mother and Wife of Washington* (1850), pp. 213-215.

<sup>13</sup> Anne Hollingsworth Wharton, *Martha Washington* (1897), pp. 264-265.

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[Tobias Lear diary, 14 Dec. 1799]

... In the course of the afternoon he [Washington] appeared to be in great pain and distress, from the difficulty of breathing, and frequently changed his position in the bed. On these occasions I lay upon the bed, and endeavoured to raise him, and turn him with as much care as possible. He appeared penetrated with gratitude for my attentions, & often said, I am afraid I shall fatigue you too much, and upon my assuring him that I could feel nothing but a wish to give him ease, he replied, "*Well it is a debt we must pay to each other, and I hope when you want aid of this kind you will find it.*"

He asked when Mr. Lewis & Washington Custis would return, (they were in New Kent) I told him about the 20th. of the month.

About 5 o'clock Dr. [James] Craik came again into the room & upon going to the bed side 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 can not last long.*

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

Between 5 & 6 o'clock Dr. Dick & Dr. Brown came 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 can not last long." They found that all which had been done was without effect; he laid down again and all retired except 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 and applied blisters and cataplasms of wheat bran to his legs and 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. Peter, 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) 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 bed side. The General's hand fell from his wrist -- I took it in mine and put it into 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 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!*"¹⁴

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The two years of life that remained to Martha Washington were passed at Mount Vernon, which had been the scene of the chief joys and sorrows of her eventful career. Here, surrounded by her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, she passed her days in quietness, cheerful in her sorrow and loneliness as she had been through all the varied scenes of her life, receiving with unflinching courtesy and hospitality those who came to express their sympathy for her, or to do honor to the memory of her husband. One interesting picture of Mrs. Washington in her widowhood has come to us from the pen of the Rev. Manasseh Cutler, who visited her about two years after the General's death: —

"On Friday last, Messrs. Hillhouse, Davenport, J. C. Smith, Mattoon, Perkins, Tallmadge, and Goddard, and myself, made a visit to Mount Vernon to pay our respects to Mrs. Washington. We were received in the most polite and Cordial manner, and handsomely entertained... When our coaches entered the yard, a number of servants immediately attended, and when we had all stepped out of our Carriages, a servant conducted us to Madam Washington's room, where we were introduced by Mr. Hillhouse, and received in a very cordial and obliging manner. Mrs. Washington was sitting in rather a small room, with three ladies (granddaughters), one of whom is married to a Mr. Lewis, and has two fine children; the other two are single. Mrs. Washington appears much older than when I saw her last at Philadelphia, but her countenance very little wrinkled and remarkably fair for a person of her years. She conversed with great ease and familiarity, and appeared as much rejoiced at receiving our visit as if we had been of her nearest connections. She regretted that we had not arrived sooner, for she always breakfasted at seven, but our breakfast would be ready in a few minutes. In a short time she rose, and desired us to walk into another room, where a table was elegantly spread with ham, cold corn beef, cold fowl, red herring and cold mutton, the dishes ornamented with sprigs of parsley and other vegetables from the garden.

"At the head of the table was the tea and coffee equipage, where she seated herself, and sent the tea and coffee to the company. We were all Federalists, which evidently gave her particular pleasure. Her remarks were frequently pointed and sometimes very sarcastic, on the new order of things, and the present administration... She appeared in good health, but like one who has sustained a loss that will always remain fresh in her mind. She spoke of the General with great affection, and observed that, though she had many favors and mercies, for which she desired to bless God, she felt as if she was become a stranger among her friends, and could welcome the time when she should be called to follow her deceased friend."

A few months later, in May, 1802, the newspapers all over the country announced the death of the widow of Washington, and the nation realized that the last living link was severed that had bound it to the family of the great General. Little is known of the closing scenes of Martha Washington's life. A "Communication" to an Alexandria journal gives the following details:

"On Saturday the 22d of May, at 12 o'clock, P. M. Mrs. Washington terminated her well spent life. Composure and resignation were uniformly displayed during seventeen day's deprivations of a severe fever. From the commencement she declared that she was undergoing the final trial, and had long been prepared for her dissolution. She took the sacrament from Mr. Davis, imparted her last advice and benedictions to her weeping relations, and sent for a white gown, which she had previously laid by for her

<sup>14</sup> Tobias Lear, *Letters and Recollections of George Washington: Being Letters to Tobias Lear and Others Between 1790 and 1799, Showing the First American in the Management of His Estate and Domestic Affairs* (1906), originally edited by Jared Sparks, pp. 133-135.

last dress -- thus in the closing scene, as in all the preceding ones, nothing was omitted. The conjugal, maternal and domestic duties had all been fulfilled in an exemplary manner. She was the worthy partner of the worthiest of men, and those who witnessed their conduct could not determine which excelled in their different characters, both were so well sustained on every occasion. They lived an honor and a pattern to their country, and are taken from us to receive the rewards -- promised to the faithful and just."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Anne Hollingsworth Wharton, *Martha Washington* (1897), pp. 284-286.