

# The Final Days and Unexpected Death of President George Washington

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George Washington, the first president of the United States [Image 1], serving from 1789 to 1797, died at his Mount Vernon, Virginia, home on December 14th, 1799, at the age of 67 [Image 2]. His death was unexpected; he had been in good health two days prior.

The sudden cascade of events leading to his death began on the morning of December 12th. While supervising his properties on horseback, light snow began to fall, and the weather soon worsened. Hail pelted down, and then sheets of rain. The former commander-in-chief of the nation and the Continental Army, however, continued his work for several hours, and then returned home to prepare to greet

guests for dinner that evening. "Known for his punctuality, he remained in his damp attire," according to an article on the website, George Washington's Mount Vernon.<sup>1</sup>

The following day, despite awakening with a sore throat and hoarseness, he saddled up and inspected the woods on his property, marking trees to take down. That night his throat became increasingly painful and he had difficulty breathing. The next morning, his wife, Martha, asked his former aide-de-camp and now assistant, Col. Tobias Lear, to send for the president's longtime physician and physician general of the US Army, **DR. JAMES CRAIK**, a graduate of the University of Edinburgh medical school. In him, Washington



**Image 1.** George Washington/Weidenbach A, Stuart G, ca. 1876.

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had the utmost confidence. Martha also summoned two other physicians, **DRS. GUSTAVUS RICHARD BROWN** and **ELISHA CULLEN DICK**.



**Image 2.** George Washington on his deathbed.

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## Bloodletting & Blistering: the Modalities of the Times

While they waited for the doctors' arrival, bloodletting was initiated at Washington's request, by the estate's overseer. Col. Lear subsequently wrote an eyewitness account of Washington's final hours. "A mixture of molasses, vinegar and butter was given to try its effects on the throat, but he could not swallow a drop; whenever he attempted it he appeared to be distressed, convulsed, and almost suffocated."<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Craik arrived at Mount Vernon mid-morning. In an article written by **DR. HOWARD MARKEL** for the PBS News Hour, "After taking the medical history, he [Dr. Craik] applied a painful 'blister of cantharides,' to Washington's throat....The blisters raised by this toxic stuff would supposedly draw out the deadly humors causing the General's throat inflammation."<sup>3</sup>



**Image 3.** Old tomb at Mount Vernon in which Washington's remains were first placed, and from which they were removed in 1831 to the new tomb, which was built according to directions in Washington's will, and where they now lie.

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Several subsequent bloodlettings were performed throughout the day, removing 40 percent of his total blood volume. An enema was administered, and gargling with a sage tea, laced with vinegar, proved unsuccessful. Washington was ambulatory and able to sit in his chair for a few hours. During this time, he and his wife reviewed his will, making some changes. However, breathing while lying on his back in bed proved extremely difficult.

Dr. Markel wrote in his article that "by 8 p.m., blisters of cantharides were applied to his feet, arms and legs while wheat poultices were placed upon his throat with little improvement. At 10 p.m., Washington murmured some last words about burial instructions to Col. Lear."<sup>3</sup>

Washington, in his extremis, thanked the doctors at his bedside for their efforts, and approached his death with equanimity. The last conversation he had was with Col. Lear. "Have me decently buried; and do not let my body be put into the vault in less than three days after I am dead. ...Do you understand?" Upon receiving verbal confirmation that his last wishes would be honored, Washington spoke his final words: "Tis well."<sup>1</sup>

### Cause of Death

Dr. Craik determined the cause of death to be inflammatory quinsy, or peritonsillar abscess. Modern-day differential diagnoses include diphtheria, streptococcal throat infection, pneumonia, or acute bacterial epiglottitis.

**HEINZ H. E. SCHEIDEMANDEL, MD**, in a JAMA article, "Did George Washington Die of Quinsy?" wrote that the president's problem "was first diagnosed as quinsy and later modified to Cynanche trachealis. A review of the signs, symptoms, and clinical course of his fatal illness suggests that the cause of death was most likely an otolaryngologic emergency known as acute epiglottitis."<sup>4</sup> Cynanche trachealis referred to an inflammation of the glottis, larynx, or upper part of the trachea.

A solemn funeral was held at Mount Vernon four days later, when Washington was buried in the family tomb [Image 3]. Several weeks later, President John Adams declared a federal holiday in honor of the first president, on February 22nd, Washington's birthday. ♦

### References

1. The Death of George Washington, <https://www.mountvernon.org>
2. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/06-04-02-0406-0002>
3. Markel H. "Dec. 14, 1799: The excruciating final hours of President George Washington." PBS News Hour, Health. 2014. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/dec-14-1799-excruciating-final-hours-president-george-washington>
4. Scheideman HHE. Did George Washington Die of Quinsy? Arch Otolaryngol. 1976; 102(9):519-521. 10.1001/archotol.1976.00780140051001