

A GENERAL'S FAREWELL

WITH PEACE ASSURED, GEORGE WASHINGTON TRAVELED 400 EMOTIONAL MILES TO RETURN TO CIVILIAN LIFE AND KEEP A PROMISE TO HIS WIFE TO BE HOME BY CHRISTMAS.



During the autumn of 1783, General George Washington promised his wife Martha that he'd be home for Christmas. He made the vow from upstate New York after learning the peace treaty with England had finally been signed and deciding he would resign his command of the rag-tag army that, after eight grueling years, had beaten the British forces in America.

Washington's journey home from West Point to Mount Vernon would be four hundred miles as the crow flies. The five-week trip would be among the most emotional in American history, with sumptuous feasts and dancing, grateful expressions from statesmen and common folk, and heartfelt farewell speeches that caused great men to openly weep.



By comparison, Washington's arrival at Mount Vernon on that wintry Christmas Eve was calm and uneventful. Home at last, as he had promised, he carefully hung his famous blue military coat with its buff trim, along with his buff waistcoat and breeches, in a wardrobe in his bedroom. He put his cherished battle sword with its black leather scabbard into a nearby cupboard. He recalled some days later, with relief: "I was no longer a public man nor had anything to do with public transactions."

Of course, his retirement would last a mere six years before the nation once again called upon him to serve.

Americans today may find it hard to appreciate the impact of Washington's decision in 1783 to return to private life. From "the shot heard 'round the world" in 1775 until British General William Cornwallis surrendered in Virginia at Yorktown in 1781, Washington, as commander-in-chief of colonial forces, had gained a level of public adoration few men throughout history have attained.

Face of a Nation

During the years when his tattered army suffered defeat after defeat, Washington had faced his share of scorn and ridicule from Congressional and citizen critics. Across the land, colonial governments were in disarray, and American soldiers were starving and fighting without pay - sometimes without even guns or shoes - yet Washington never wavered in his dedication to them.

This tall, red-haired Virginian with uncommonly noble features pleaded with Congress and colonial legislatures on behalf of his troops for much-needed supplies and armaments.

Previous page: This painting now hangs in the United States Capitol rotunda. It depicts Washington handing over his resignation as commander in chief of the army to Congress during the tearful session at the Maryland State House in Annapolis on December 23, 1783. Painted by John Trumbull in 1824, it shows Martha Washington and her three grandchildren in the gallery, though they were not actually present.

For eight years, he displayed compassionate leadership as he mounted military campaigns of strategic brilliance against overwhelming odds.

Over time, Washington became the strongest unifying presence in the colonies. With the end of hostilities in 1781, he came to symbolize personal and national stability. As the new “united” states faltered and the national economy reeled in chaos, several statesmen seriously considered asking him to serve as America’s dictator – in the manner of the famed ancient Roman general Lucius Quintium Cincinnatus, to whom Washington was frequently compared – to stop the new country from openly disintegrating.

This extraordinary devotion was visible at nearly every mile on Washington’s triumphant Christmas journey home to Mount Vernon.

“Free from the Bustle”

When the fighting with England ended, there were 26,000 British troops remaining in America. To the relief of the colonists, open warfare did not resume. After two years, on September 3, 1783, British negotiators in Paris approved the peace treaty acknowledging the new United States. News traveled slowly in the late 18th century, and it would be two months before Washington learned of the agreement.

Washington was nearly fifty-two, graying at the temples, and already had decided to return to private life at Mount Vernon in northern Virginia. He’d written to his friend and military compatriot, the Marquis de Lafayette, of wanting to “become a private citizen on the banks of the Potomac, and under the shade of my own Vine and my own Fig tree, free from the bustle of a camp and the busy scenes of public life ... to move gently down the stream of life until I sleep with my fathers.”

To accomplish this, he planned to give back the commander-in-chief commission the Continental Congress had awarded him in 1775. He could submit his resignation when the new United States Congress convened in December in Annapolis, Maryland. In other words, he could do it on his way home to Martha at Mount Vernon.

Fact is, though he had married the popular and wealthy Martha Dandridge Custis in 1759, they had been apart for nearly half of their marriage because of his military obligations. Since 1775, he’d been back to Mount Vernon only once, for a couple of days in 1781 during the siege of Yorktown.

“Astonishing Events”

Meanwhile, 12,000 British troops still were garrisoned in New York City and it was Washington’s duty to see that they departed peacefully. He planned to accomplish this with a small force of soldiers, which is about all that remained of the Continental Army. Most of his volunteers and militiamen already had returned to their farms and towns to resume their lives.

With the treaty signed, Congress told Washington to dismiss most of the remaining soldiers. From his post at West Point, Washington attached his personal “Farewell Orders to the Armies of the United States” to the congressional order. In his brief statement, he asked each veteran always to remember “scenes in which he has been called to act no inglorious part, and the astonishing events of which he has been a witness, events which have seldom if ever before taken place on the stage of human action nor can they probably happen again.”

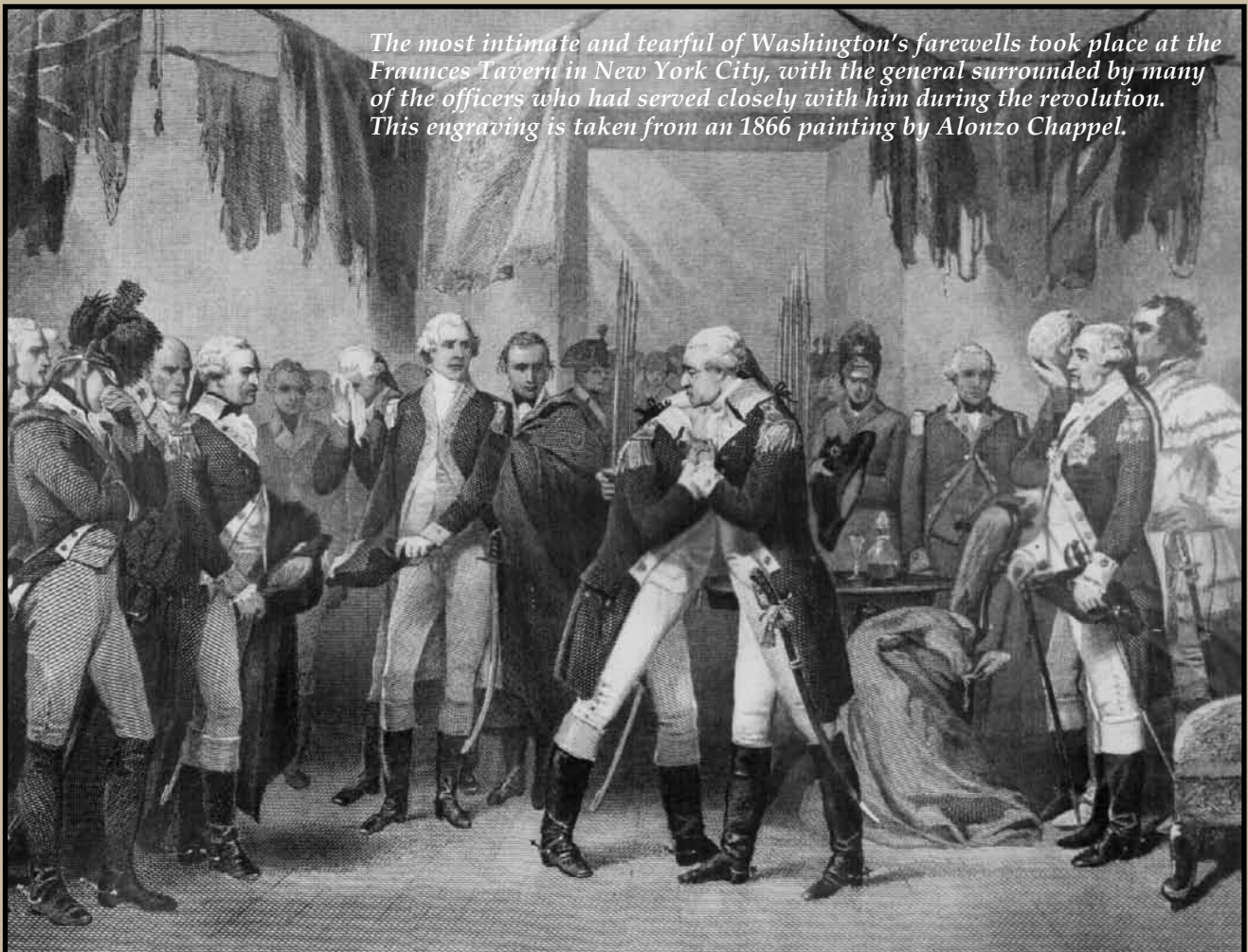
“For who has before seen a disciplined army formed,” he asked, “from such raw materials?”

One week later, Washington marched into New York City with 800 ragged and poorly equipped soldiers to oversee the departure of the British garrison, which had occupied the city since the early days of the revolution.

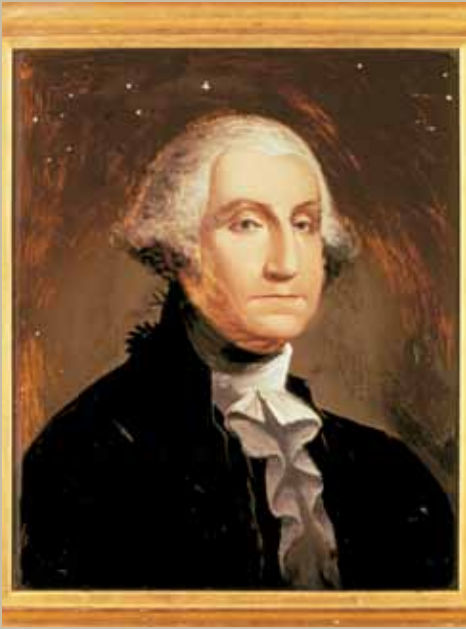
“We had been accustomed for a long time to military display in all the finish and finery of garrison life,” a young woman spectator on Broadway Avenue later recalled. “The British troops just leaving us were as if equipped for show, and with their scarlet uniforms and burnished arms made a brilliant display. The troops that marched in, on the contrary, were ill-clad and weather-beaten, and made a forlorn appearance. But they were our troops – and as I looked at them and thought upon all they had done and suffered for us, my heart and my eyes were full, and I admired and gloried in them all the more because they were so weather-beaten and forlorn.”

“Scene of Such Sorrow”

Washington spent several days immersed in meetings and bureaucratic paperwork, but by December 4 was ready to continue toward Annapolis and then home. It was time to say good-bye to the men who had remained closest to him throughout the war, his officers. The group convening that day at the Fraunces Tavern included only three of the army’s twenty-nine major generals, the rest having already resigned or died, and only one of the army’s forty-four brigadier generals. But several colonels, majors and captains came for the solemn farewell.



The most intimate and tearful of Washington’s farewells took place at the Fraunces Tavern in New York City, with the general surrounded by many of the officers who had served closely with him during the revolution. This engraving is taken from an 1866 painting by Alonzo Chappel.



Left: This portrait of George Washington is by the famed American folk artist William Matthew Prior (1806-1873), who painted it about 1865. It's a reverse painting on glass and is the property of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

About noon, Washington, standing tall in his familiar blue and buff uniform, poured a glass of wine and raised it high. The men did the same and waited in silence. "With a heart filled with love and gratitude, I now take leave of you," Washington said, his voice tightening. "I most devoutly wish that your later days may be as prosperous and happy as your former ones have been glorious and honorable."

His eyes filled and his voice faltered. "I cannot come to each of you, but shall feel obliged if each of you will come and take me by the hand." When General Henry Knox then reached for Washington's hand, tears streamed down the commander's cheeks.

"Such a scene of sorrow and weeping I had never before witnessed," Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Tallmadge of Long Island recalled. "The simple thought that we were then about to part from the man who had conducted us through a long and bloody war, and under whose conduct the glory and independence of our country had been achieved, and that we should see his face no more in this world seemed to me utterly unsupportable."

"A Wise, Just and United People"

Heading south toward Philadelphia, Washington was reminded of the divided loyalties of the former American colonies. During the war, New Jersey had been predominantly faithful to the Crown, as demonstrated one day when Washington tried to recruit new soldiers in Newark. He was able to attract thirty volunteers while the British on the same day and locale enlisted three hundred.

But now, citizens rode ahead of the general's entourage, alerting their neighbors so that crowds greeted him in every community, something that would occur almost daily until his Christmas Eve homecoming.

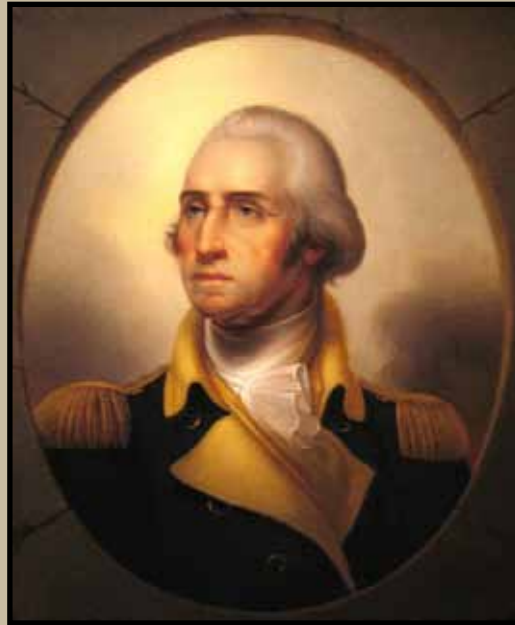
Arriving in Philadelphia, Washington addressed the commonwealth's General Assembly, a group that had frequently given him trouble during the war when he sought financial support for his army. Now, however, Washington only spoke positively and encouraged national unity. "May the representatives and citizens of this commonwealth continue to possess the same good dispositions, and may they be as happy in the employment of peace as it is possible for a wise, just, and united people to be," he told Pennsylvania's legislators.

During Washington's weeklong stay in Philadelphia, the city's merchants' association sponsored a lavish ball in his honor. It was well known that during the British occupation of Philadelphia in 1777 and 1778, grand balls and other entertainments were frequent occasions for the city's upper crust - British General William Howe far preferring the ballroom to bloody battlefields - and many of the city's merchants had thrived due to British commerce.

Six years later, on the night of December 12, Washington - an excellent dancer who seldom missed an opportunity to demonstrate his talent - spent hours dancing minuets and reels with Philadelphia's



Martha Washington (1731-1802) as depicted in a Rembrandt Peale painting of about 1853.



Artist Rembrandt Peale first painted George Washington in 1795. He revised his first painting in 1823 to the version shown here.

socialites, politely refraining from commenting on the numerous balls many of them had enjoyed as guests of his British enemies.

“To Get a Touch of Him”

Leaving Philadelphia on December 15, Washington now traveled with only a couple of aides and servants, riding hard to cover ground before the early dusk. In Baltimore, Washington was honored with another sumptuous dinner and a ball at the Fountain Inn. To the delight of every fashionably primed lady, Washington danced with each and every one. Men and women alike crowded close to Washington, reaching out to touch the great man with their gloved hands.

On and on they danced until, at 2 o'clock in the morning of December 19, Washington – who rose every morning at 5 o'clock – announced that the festivities must end if he was to continue on his journey to Annapolis. The music stopped, and the crowd bid reluctant farewells to their esteemed guest.

Later that day, Washington and a welcoming party entered Annapolis to the roar of thirteen rounds of cannon fire. A couple of days later he again was the featured guest at an “elegant and profuse” dinner and ball Governor William Paca conducted at the Maryland State House. The two hundred male diners consumed ninety-eight bottles of wine and nearly three gallons of liquor – with a total of thirteen toasts, each followed by the roar of cannons that shook the State House. Attendee James Tilton of Delaware called it “the most extraordinary meal I have ever attended.”

After the alcohol-fueled meal, women in fashionable hoopskirts and high-heeled dancing shoes were permitted into the ballroom. Washington opened the ball with the beautiful and wealthy 22-year-old Martha Rolle Maccubin as his dance partner. “He danced every set, that all the ladies might have the pleasure of dancing with him,” Tilton wrote, “or as it has since been handsomely expressed, get a touch of him.”

“An Affectionate Farewell”

Next morning, Washington and his servants packed his bags and trunks and posted the horses outside of the State House for a quick departure. The general arrived just before noon in his blue and buff uniform, his original commission as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army tucked into his coat pocket.

Congress had been struggling to achieve a quorum in Annapolis, with the number of states represented recently dwindling to five. But this day, representatives appeared from Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, North and South Carolina, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Pennsylvania - 20 congressmen in all. An audience of citizens crowded into the building. A hush fell over the chambers as Washington stood, bowed, and began reading his speech, his hands visibly shaking.

“His voice faltered and sunk, and the whole house felt his agitations,” James McHenry of Baltimore later wrote. “When he recovered himself, he proceeded in the most penetrating manner.”

Washington announced: “Happy in the confirmation of our independence and sovereignty, and pleased with the opportunity afforded the United States of becoming a respectable nation, I resign with satisfaction the appointment I accepted with diffidence.” He tightened his grip on the paper to keep his hands steady.

“I consider it an indispensable duty to close this last solemn act of my official life by commending the interests of our dearest country to the protection of Almighty God, and those who have the superintendence of them, to his holy keeping,” he went on. “Having now finished the work assigned



me, I return from the great theater of action; and bidding an affectionate farewell to this august body under whose orders I have so long acted, I here offer my commission, and take my leave of all the employments of public life."

Washington again bowed and handed over his commission. The congressmen stood silently as Washington and his aides left the chamber and, as McHenry noted, "The spectators all wept and there was hardly a member of Congress who did not drop tears."

"Fondest Wish of My Heart"

His mission completed, Washington left Annapolis for home, but darkness stopped him, and it would be the next day - Christmas Eve - before he and his small party could reach the ferry landing on the Potomac River below Alexandria.

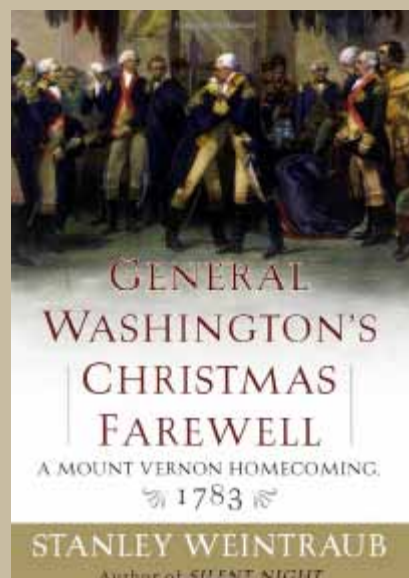
On the Virginia side of the river in late afternoon, they rode through orchards and meadows and up the long, curving drive where they could see in the distance the columned house, painted white with green shutters on the windows where lighted candles gleamed.

The events of that Christmas Day at Mount Vernon were not recorded. It is known that Washington, while in New York, stocked boxes with lockets, sashes, hats, and stockings for Martha, and books, a fiddle and a whirligig for his Custis stepchildren.

Martha, a few years later in a letter to a friend, admitted: "I little thought when the war was finished that any circumstance could possibly happen to call the general into public life again." She believed that, from the moment of his return that they "should have grown old together, in solitude and tranquility - this, my dear madam, was the first and fondest wish of my heart."

But as we now know, six years later - still in dire need of a competent leader - the nation again sought the former general for a new command. In 1789, members of the new Electoral College made him the first president, the only president to this day to receive 100 percent of the electoral votes. He went on to serve a second term and retired once again from public life in 1797.

Washington died of a sudden sickness two years later at Mount Vernon at age 67. His final words in his diary were, "Tis well."



To Learn More ...

If you enjoyed this article, you might want to read the excellent "General Washington's Christmas Farewell" by the esteemed historian Stanley Weintraub (Plume, 2004). It's a deeper exploration of Washington's dramatic journey from West Point to Mount Vernon. Professor Weintraub has taught at Pennsylvania State University and is the author of numerous histories and biographies.