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The Lowest Ebb of Misery: Death and Mourning in the Family of George Washington

By Mary V. Thompson



*View of Mount Vernon from the northeast,
attributed to Edward Savage, circa 1792.*

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While every person who has ever lived has had to face death, both their own and that of the people they love, typical modern-day Americans have, to a great degree, tried to distance themselves from this simple fact of life. The subject is uncomfortable for most people to discuss, our loved ones die in the sterile environment of a hospital or nursing

home, and after their deaths, strangers prepare their bodies for burial. Afterwards, the death of a loved one and its impact on the survivors is virtually denied; surviving family members wear bright colors, continue to take part in work and social activities, and anyone meeting them during the course of those activities has no idea that their emotional control may be quite problematic.

How different this is from the situation in much of the world today and in ethnic neighborhoods in our own country. The majority of my teenage years, for example, were spent in a

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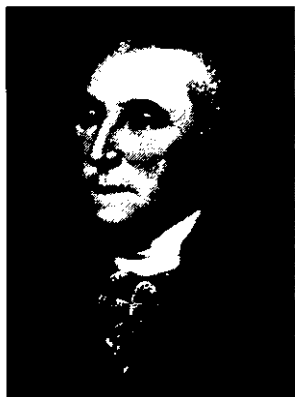
primarily Italian immigrant neighborhood in New York City, which also had sizable Jewish, and Greek populations. Almost every grandmother I knew was widowed and wore, starting at the top and working down, a black kerchief, black dress, black stockings, black shoes. and carried a black purse. Barring the unlikely event of a second marriage, these women never expected to wear anything but solid black again. The situation has now loosened up somewhat, at least back Greece, if not in my old neighborhood. In the 1980s, I met the mother of a friend, who was visiting from her small village in the northern part of that country, near the Albanian border. Only one year after the death of her husband, she was delighted to be able to shop for clothes, which were black and white, noting that the customs had relaxed enough by that point that she could, for the rest of her life, continue to wear patterned clothes in those two colors, so long as the black predominated. A few years later, another friend, this one from Jordan, called to apologize for not sending a Christmas card and explained that for a year after the death of a close relative, families typically refrain from celebrating holidays, cut back on socializing, and even postpone family events like weddings. All of these practices not only recognize the pivotal role death plays in the lives of those left behind, but the fact that grieving is both a fact of life and a process. They also serve to help others realize that someone they have just met might be in a very fragile emotional state and to tread lightly.

These customs also bear a strong resemblance to mourning rituals in our own country at the time of its founding. In the following pages, I would like to look at death and mourning practices in the United States as they were experienced by just one family, focusing on textiles wherever possible. During the eighteenth century, George Washington was arguably the best-known American of his time.

The fact that he and various members of his family, through their letters, diaries, account books, and memoirs, have made Mount Vernon perhaps the best-documented plantation of the period, makes them especially fine subjects for study. This is even more the case since most research in the past has focused on the public, rather than domestic, aspects of George Washington's life and has largely ignored other members of the family, from whom there is much to learn.

Death, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, touched people's lives early and often and George Washington's family was hardly immune. According to one historian, one-quarter of all the children born at this period died before they could walk and half the people in the world died before the age of nine. The number of women dying in childbirth could be enormous, varying with the competence of the midwife or doctor from a low of 4-5 maternal deaths per 1,000 live births in rural New England to a high of 222.2 maternal deaths per 1,000 live births in a London hospital in the last half of the eighteenth century. To put these figures into perspective, in the United States at the present time, the maternal death rate is 1 in 10,000 births. In addition to these "everyday" situations, other more catastrophic occurrences resulted in large numbers of deaths at once. Wartime situations have historically brought death to many more than just battlefield casualties. The gathering together in an army of many men from different parts of the country had a tendency to congregate different disease-causing organisms, which previously had been locally isolated. The wide-ranging movements of large groups of people, either serving with or displaced by these armies, exposed countless numbers to these disease agents, while lack of proper diet, exposure, fatigue, and stress could all increase susceptibility to disease. Medical historians estimate that for every American soldier killed

by the British during the Revolution, nine others died of disease. One such victim was Martha Washington's twenty-seven-year-old son, John Parke Custis, who died of "camp fever" at Yorktown in 1781, leaving his young widow with four small children, and robbing his mother and step-father of the joy of that victory over the British. Large numbers of other people succumbed to epidemic disease. A decade later, a yellow fever epidemic struck the nation's capital, Philadelphia, during George Washington's presidency. Lasting most of the summer and fall of 1793, the daily burial rate in the city jumped from an average of 3-5 per day prior to the onset of the disease to a height of 119 on the worst day in October. Ten percent of Philadelphia's population died in that epidemic, including, probably, Mary Long Lear, the wife of George Washington's secretary, whose sudden death after a short illness at the end of July may have placed her among the earliest victims.



Portrait by Charles Wilson Peale, 1795, during Washington's second term as President. age 63

George Washington himself was just a toddler when he came in contact with death for the first time. He was only two years old when his 11-year old half-sister Jane died in 1734. His baby sister, Mildred, just one year old, was lost when he was eight and, in what might be seen as the most devastating loss of the first part of

his life, his father, Augustine, who was forty-nine, died when George himself was eleven. Nine years later, Lawrence, the older brother who had stepped in as a surrogate parent during Washington's teens, succumbed to tuberculosis in 1752 at the age of thirty-four. In the next few years, George Washington spent much of his time on the Virginia and Pennsylvania frontier, protecting the settlers in that land from the French and their Native American allies. There, he faced the threat of imminent death, writing at one point to his favorite brother:

As I have heard. ..a circumstantial account of my death and dying speech, I take this early opportunity of contradicting both, and of assuring you that I now exist and appear in the land of the living by the miraculous care of Providence, that protected me beyond all human expectation; I had 4 Bullets through my Coat, and two Horses shot under me, and yet escaped unhurt.

In 1759, at the age of twenty-six, George Washington married Martha Dandridge Custis, a sweet and loving young woman not quite a year older than himself. By the time of their marriage, Martha herself had suffered the loss, within the space of just three years, of her three-year old son in 1754, her father John Dandridge two years later, at the age of fifty-six, and, in 1757, both her first husband, Daniel, who was forty-six, and a four-year old daughter. Almost twenty years and many deaths later, Martha Washington wrote to console her brother-in-law, after the death of her favorite sister, Anna Maria, and, in the depths of her grief, let slip the effect so many losses had had on her heart:

I doe most sincerely lament and condole with you, on the loss of our dear departed Friend she has I hope made a happy exchange - and only gon a little before us the

time draws near when I hope we shall meet never more to part - if to meet our departed Friends and know them was certain we could have very little reason to desire to stay in this world where if we are at ease one hour we are in affliction days.

To the eighteenth and early nineteenth century members of the Washington family, death was a part of everyday life which could not and would not be ignored. Several good examples of how omnipresent death could be come from the life of Martha Washington's youngest granddaughter, Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis, who became the mistress of Woodlawn Plantation. Known as Nelly, she had married George Washington's nephew, Lawrence Lewis, in a ceremony at Mount Vernon on George Washington's final birthday, February 22, 1799. Perhaps the best source for information on Nelly's life and personality comes from her surviving correspondence with long-time friend, Elizabeth Bordley Gibson of Philadelphia, which lasted from the time the girls were teenagers until the end of Nelly's life in 1852, when she was seventy-four. There was a break in the correspondence, which lasted from several months after the wedding until 1804, after which Nelly's personality exhibited a marked shift, Where before she had been high-spirited, fun-loving, impudent, and mischievous, the mature Nelly exhibited sadness, whininess, and a certain degree of bitterness; she was an over-protective mother, who shared a bed with her children, instead of her husband, and complained about the isolation of living on a plantation and the lack of money to be made through farming. While there are a number of causes for this change, the five-year period of the break in correspondence also saw a series of profound losses in Nelly's life. In those five years, Nelly lost, not only George Washington, the step-grandfather she adored, on December 14, 1799, but also her beloved grandmother Martha

Washington in May of 1802, followed almost immediately by the deaths of her own second and third children, a ten-month old daughter named Martha Betty Lewis, and an infant son, who was called Lawrence Fielding Lewis and died shortly after his birth.

Portia Lee, who attended Martha Washington's funeral, described Nelly's physical and emotional state in a letter, written shortly after that event:



Portrait of Martha Washington by Robert Field, watercolor on ivory. miniature, 1801, painted the year before her death.

Nellie Lewis was the Picture of Woe. never did I see silent Grief so strongly marked as in her countenance. she did not shed a tear, and scarcely breathed a sigh-poor Soul. both her children [first & second children] were taken with the Measles, the night of her Grandmothers Death. Sunday I sent to enquire after them]. the youngest was supposed to be dying, (I have since heard was Dead). Mrs. Lewis confined to her Bed, with violent Rash and Fever. she is quite large again [in other words, was pregnant]. I feel for her most sincerely, and fear she will sink, under the accumulated sufferings, of Mind [sic] and Body. losses so rapid, and of those so dear, require great exertion of Piety, and strength of Mind to support these qualities I am sure she

possesses and now they will be called into action.

While one might hope that this was the last time Nelly had to face so many tragedies at once, other periods in her life were even worse. In the spring of 1821, she confided in her friend Elizabeth that she had lost six of her nearest relations in the past thirteen months; by October of the following year, two more relatives had died, leading her to write, "In less than thirty months, eight of my nearest connections have died." Two months later, she asked Elizabeth to have a couple of dresses made up for her in the city. She sent along enough material--1 3 yards of black gros de Naples, 12 yards of figured lustring, 2% yards of black satin, quantities of both broad and narrow lace--to complete the project and a crape dress to use as a pattern for the new gowns, with the comment that "I wear only black." Nelly would eventually outlive her husband and seven of their eight children, while her older sister, Martha Parke Custis Peter of Tudor Place, also the mother of eight, survived both her husband and all but two of their children.

While some deaths within the Washington Custis family were the result of long-standing battles with diseases such as tuberculosis, or, in the case of George Washington's mother, breast cancer, the family also experienced first-hand just how swiftly and unexpectedly death could come to those they loved. In the summer of 1773, Martha Washington's daughter, 17-year-old Patsy Custis, who had suffered from debilitating seizures since she was six, was experiencing "Better health and spirits" than she had for some time. A number of family members were visiting, including George Washington's brother, John Augustine, his wife Hannah, and two of their children, and Eleanor Calvert, who was the fiancée of Patsy's brother, John Parke

Custis. About 4 o'clock in the afternoon, after everyone had finished dinner, Patsy and Eleanor were talking quietly when Patsy went to her room to get a recent letter from her brother, who was away at college. Hearing a strange noise coming from Patsy's room, Eleanor found the young woman on the floor, in the throes of a life-threatening seizure. Patsy was moved to the bed, and family members who were there later recalled the scene as Martha Washington frantically sought for help, while her husband knelt beside the stepdaughter he had raised since she was not quite two, with tears streaming down his face, and prayed for her recovery. Less than two minutes later, she was dead, "without uttering a Word, a groan, or scarce a Sigh." In a letter to his brother-in-law, written the following day, George Washington related the news that Patsy, his "Sweet Innocent Girl," had been buried earlier in the day and that the situation had "almost reduced my poor Wife to the lowest ebb of Misery."

Just a few months after his return from the Revolution, George Washington received a letter from his brother, John Augustine Washington of Bushfield, relating the news that the latter's 17-year-old son had died of a gunshot wound. The young man had been away at boarding school at the time, when a fellow student "trifling with a loaded gun," accidentally discharged the weapon, striking John Augustine's youngest son in the chest; the boy died within a few minutes. John Augustine confided in his brother his concern about the way his wife was behaving in dealing with this death:

I wish to God Mrs. Washington could have borne this loss as well as myself-but the shock was too great for her infirm frame to bear with any tolerable fortitude, upon the first communication she fell into a Strong Convulsion which continued for some time,

and when that went off. she lay for near four hours in a state of insensibility, when her reason returned. her grief did also and she had a return of the Fit. she is now in a very low state both of Body and mind....

Hoping to bring her some comfort, John Augustine was making an effort to bring her two surviving sons home from school, but was hampered in his efforts by the severe winter weather.

The most famous death in the Washington family was that of George Washington himself and it, too, was swift and unexpected. About 10 o'clock in the morning on Thursday, December 12, 1799, Washington set off on horseback to make his customary circuit of his plantation, to check on the progress of various work projects and see to the health and well-being of his employees, slaves, and livestock. Throughout the day, the weather alternated between rain, hail, and snow, and Washington's secretary, Tobias Lear, noted that when Washington returned home for dinner about 3 o'clock, "his neck appeared to be wet, and the snow was hanging upon his hair," and he did not change clothes, as was his custom, before sitting down to eat. A heavy snowfall kept Washington indoors for most of the day on Friday, but he insisted, despite complaints of a sore throat, on going out between the Mansion and the Potomac River in the afternoon to mark some trees that he intended to have cut down to improve the view. He became increasingly hoarse throughout the evening, but "made light of it." Washington went up to bed sometime after 9:00 p.m., but woke his wife between 2 and 3 o'clock on Saturday morning to tell her that he was sick. She noticed that he could barely speak and was having difficulty breathing, but he would not permit her to call for help, fearing that she would catch cold.



"Washington's Final Hours," unidentified artist, etching, ca. 1800, depicting Washington in his last illness attended by Drs. Craik and Brown.

When Caroline, one of the slaves, came in to light the fire in the morning, Mrs. Washington began rallying people to assist and treat her husband. During the course of the day, in the hands of three physicians, he was: bled four times, losing a total of about 80 ounces, or 5 pints, of blood; made to gargle with vinegar and sage tea and inhale vinegar and hot water; had his throat bathed with sal volatile (ammonium carbonate) and his feet with warm water; given various concoctions to drink, including a mixture of molasses, vinegar, and butter; subjected to a blister of Spanish fly on his throat, an enema, and an emetic; and finally had a blister and poultice of wheat bran applied to his legs, all to no avail. According to one family member, Washington "did not take leave of any of the family as he had frequently disapproved of the afflicting farewells which aggravated sorrow on these melancholy occasions." He died sometime between 10 and 11 o'clock that night, December 14, 1799 .

The response of Martha Washington, the woman to whom he had been married for forty

years, was heartbreaking. Shortly after George Washington breathed his last, Martha, who had been sitting at the foot of the bed, asked "Is he gone?" When her fears were confirmed, she responded, "'Tis well.. .All is now over I shall soon follow him! I have *no* more trials to pass through!" Thomas Law, who was the husband of her oldest granddaughter, mentioned to a brother two nights later that Mrs. Washington had sent for him earlier in the day and that she "displayed a solemn composure that was more distressing than floods of tears." Her inability to relieve her grief by crying was noted by several people who knew her. Washington's secretary, Tobias Lear, wrote to his mother on December 16th, two days after Washington died, and told her that since the death, Mrs. Washington "has preserved the same pious fortitude. It afflicts me to see her. The world now appears to be no longer desirable to her-- and yet she yields not to that grief which would be softened by tears." President John Adams and his wife sent condolence letters to Martha toward the end of December, about two weeks after the death, it was only then that she was finally able to let go and cry. As Abigail Adams reported to her sister, Mrs. Washington "had not been able to shed a tear since the Genlls. Death, until she received the Presidents and my Letters when she was two hours getting through them, tho they were not Lengthy." Although people at this earlier time may not have had to deal with such modern issues as ending the life of a loved one by turning off life-support systems, there were comparable concerns about burying someone who was not actually dead. Shortly before he died, George Washington made a request about his burial to his secretary, Tobias Lear, who later recorded the scene:

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.

Two years later, his sister-in-law, Hannah Bushrod Washington, made her will, which contained a long section on how her body was to be treated after her death:

no physician in the world can possibly tell whether or not a person is dead until putrefaction takes place and many have most absurdly been buried before they were dead-- As I ever had a most horrid idea of such usage I most earnestly entreat my friends to act with me in the following manner-- that when it is thought I am dead that I remain in my bed quite undisturbed in every respect my face to be uncovered not even the thinnest thing to be laid over it also I do request that not one thing be attempted about washing or dressing me--no laying out as it is called I beg--I therefore most earnestly pray that I may be allowed to remain in my bed just as I did whilst living until putrefaction by every known sign Justifies my being put into the coffin, it is my will to be laid by my ever dear husband.

If Hannah seems a bit eccentric on this subject, she was not alone. Her son, United States Supreme Court Justice Bushrod Washington, who inherited Mount Vernon from his uncle, was even more explicit about his wishes and took the step of confiding them to his doctor:

My desire is that when the event happens, the sheet on which I am then laying may be employed as a Winding Sheet and at once thrown round my Person and tied about my middle with a Pocket [sic] Handkerchief-- the common Practice of washing the Body is to be avoided- my thumbs are not to be tied together--nor anything put on my face or any restraint upon my Person by Bandages, &c.

My Body is to be placed in an entirely plain coffin with a flat Top and a sufficient number of holes bored through the lid and sides--particularly about the face and head to allow Respiration if Resuscitation should take place and having been kept so long as to ascertain whether decay may have occurred or not, the coffin is to be closed up.

While it may seem that the Washington family was especially quirky, or even paranoid, on the score of burial alive, there were enough close calls in this period to make anyone leery of burying someone too hastily. A young minister's wife from Gloucester, Massachusetts, wrote to her aunt in the summer of 1790, relating an extraordinary conversation with John Jay, the eminent American statesman, diplomat, one-time Secretary of Foreign Affairs, and first chief justice of the Supreme Court. Jay told of an illness he himself had suffered as a young man of twenty, when, on "the afternoon of the ninth day of his indisposition.. he expired":

The season was severely cold, and the demise not admitting of doubt, it was judged convenient, lest the body should too suddenly soften, to' prepare it for interment--This, however, his Mother absolutely forbid--The Father and other friends remonstrated--He is unquestionably dead--why not then proceed to perform the last offices? To satisfy, or obviate, the objections of the Old Lady, the Doctor was summoned, he examined the body, having recourse to those experiments, usual upon doubtful occasions, and he pronounced the desolation certain--Yet, still the maternal mind refused acquiescence, and in compliance with what they believed a weakness, resulting from the depths of her sorrow, they consented the deceased should remain, for some time upon the bed of death--The residue of the afternoon, the ensuing evening, and through the whole of the long winter night, until the ensuing

morning, the body continued an undoubted corpse--when lo! to the astonishment of numbers, who waited the event, with a gentle sigh the heart stricken young Man once more opened his eyes, upon the fleeting scenes of time.

Stories such as these, from credible individuals like Mr. Jay, must have struck fear into the hearts of survivors and go a long way toward explaining how Martha's youngest granddaughter, Nelly Custis Lewis, could similarly refuse to bury her daughter, Agnes, when she succumbed to a severe illness in the fall of 1820. Nelly, who had gone to Philadelphia to care for the fifteen-year-old girl, confided in a note to her friend, Elizabeth, that "They say my Child has not changed yet, if so I cannot have her put into her coffin unless certain proofs of her being past recovery appear." The signs Nelly and Mrs. Jay were looking for were things like softening of the body after rigor mortis and indications of decay. Nelly was terribly affected by this death, dreaming about her dead child, writing poems about her, and chastising herself over a year later about having possibly buried Agnes before she was actually dead:

A Mother is the most ingenious in tormenting herself too--I have often felt unhappy from the fear that my darling was buried too soon, when I have read accounts of revivals after interment--the thought has always arisen, that she too might have revived perhaps, & this idea is the most dreadful--It makes me shudder with horror--I trust that was impossible.- pardon me for such melancholy subjects--"but out of the fullness of the heart, the mouth speaketh.

Bushrod Washington's reference, above, to wrapping his body in a winding sheet is particularly interesting, because fashions in grave-clothes had changed in the eighteenth

century. In England, for example, between 1700 and 1775, winding sheets went out of style and corpses were being dressed in shrouds, described by one historian as “an open-backed long-sleeved shift with draw-strings at wrist and neck, either with or without an integral hood.” The garment would have had gathered pleats running down its length, with optional appliqued horizontal bows. The foot of the shift would have been knotted. According to English law, grave-clothes were to be made of wool alone, rather than linen and were to contain no flax, hemp, silk, hair, gold, or silver, presumably for some type of embroidered decoration, but people still preferred linen to flannel. By the 1770s, plain or flounced shrouds had become standard, with some outfits having the addition of mittens, stockings, and/or slippers. It was customary at this period to tie the ankles together and to bind the arms to the body with the waistband of the shroud. George Washington’s shroud was made by Margaret Gretter, of Alexandria, who charged the estate \$6.00 for the shroud and a like amount for the pall cloth, which was placed over the coffin. In contrast, Martha Washington, who mentally began preparing for her own death when her husband died on December 14, 1799, appears to have been buried in one of her own dresses. Thomas Law, the husband of her oldest granddaughter, wrote another relative in the spring of 1802 to inform him of the death and mentioned that, during the three weeks of her final illness, Mrs. Washington “prepared for death, gave advice to her grandchildren[,] sent for the Clergyman & took the sacrament, & at last directed a white gown to be brought which she has previously laid by for the last dress.”

With the exception of that of George Washington, funerals in the Washington/Custis family tended to be rather simple affairs. When Martha Washington’s daughter, Patsy Custis, died in June of 1773, she was laid to

rest the following day, less than 24 hours after her death, in the old family vault at Mount Vernon, in a newly-purchased coffin. covered with a black pall owned by the family, but which they had been hurriedly compelled to retrieve from friends who had borrowed it. In addition to family members, and the Reverend Lee Massey, the Anglican minister, only neighbors George William and Sally Cary Fairfax, from nearby Belvoir Plantation came for the service and the dinner afterwards. Twenty years later, when George Washington invited his friend, the Reverend Bryan Fairfax, to officiate at the funeral of his nephew, George Augustine Washington, who had died two months earlier, the president noted that the very simple ceremony, for which there need, be no funeral sermon, would start at one o’clock in the afternoon. Only a few friends were expected and dinner would be ready for them at 2:30 pm. The husband of Martha Washington’s granddaughter, Eliza, once described to a visitor the scene at the Mount Vernon funeral of the family governess:

Mr. Law was present at the interment of Mrs. Liard who brought up the granddaughters of Mrs. Washington. The ceremony took place in the evening of a beautiful day in Autumn. The sun was setting behind the bluish hills and thick forests of oak and laurel, its rays falling obliquely on the smooth waters of the Potowmack. A light wind ruffled the leaves of the trees, already half-green and half-yellow. A pastor, a venerable figure with white hair, read the prayer for the dead while the assembled family, the young women with bowed heads, eyes in tears, observed a heavy silence. “I have never seen,” he told me. “a more affecting and more august sight.”

Many years later, when Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis, the wife of Martha Washington’s grandson, died at her home, Arlington, the family determined that, for the sake of Mr.

Custis, a private funeral would be best. Her daughter, Mrs. Robert E. Lee, picked a spot for the grave and at noon on a Wednesday afternoon, probably fewer than 20 friends and neighbors gathered to say farewell. One of those present noted that "After an impressive address by Mr. Dana, and the offering of the usual prayers, the precious remains," were carried to the gravesite by four slaves, Austin, Lawrence, Daniel, and Ephraim, followed by the family, guests, "and a long train of weeping servants." Bouquets of flowers were supplied to the mourners "and as the coffin was lowered into the grave these were thrown in upon it."

Perhaps it was this type of simple and solemn funeral which George Washington had in mind for himself, when he said in his will that it was his "express desire that my Corpse may be Interred in a private manner, without--parade, or funeral Oration." His wishes were overridden, however, by those of his countrymen, who felt a strong need to grieve for the loss of this man who had given them so much and to express that grief publicly. On December 18, 1799, four days after his death, George Washington's body was escorted to the old family vault by a large procession which included: both infantry and mounted military units; a band, "playing a solemn Dirge"; Washington's riderless horse, bearing his pistols and holsters, and led by two slaves in mourning clothes; a schooner on the Potomac tiring minute guns, with eleven cannons outside the mansion returning answering fire; and several hundred family members, friends, neighbors, interested citizens, and family slaves who had come to Mount Vernon from the surrounding countryside. Once the body reached the tomb, four ministers--two Anglican and two Presbyterian--officiated in the funeral rites, which were followed by a Masonic ceremony. In addition, countless mock funerals were held throughout the United States to give the American public the chance to show

its grief, the American military was ordered to wear black armbands for a period of six months, the temporarily government suspended official entertaining, and throughout the world, even former enemies pronounced funeral orations, either draped flags in black or ordered them lowered to half-mast, and produced special funeral music in Washington's honor.

While little work has been done on mourning customs in eighteenth century America, the assumption has been that Anglo-Americans followed standard British practices. In England, at this period, people of all classes wore mourning to let the world know at a glance that someone close to them had died. Three months of full mourning were followed typically by three months of second mourning, although for some relationships the period could be longer, with husbands, for example, expected to wear mourning for an entire year, evenly divided between deep and second mourning, after the death of a wife. For women, full mourning meant the wearing of "black bombazine, plain muslin or long lawn linen, crape hoods, shamoy shoes and gloves and crape fans, and for undress dark Norwich crape." Men during this deep mourning period were expected to wear "black cloth without buttons on sleeves and pockets, plain muslin or lawn cravats and weepers, shamoy shoes and gloves, crape hatbands and black swords and buckles, and for undress, dark grey frocks." As the time came to change to second mourning, women could again wear shiny fabrics, like black silk, and white gloves for dress occasions and grey or white silk for undress, while men's linen could be fringed or plain. Children in the family were dressed customarily in mourning clothes as well, and it appears that, probably because death was something which visited every family on a fairly regular basis, even the poorest people had mourning clothes among their possessions. In addition, servants in and about the house, both male and female,

typically wore mourning clothes following a death. Like the family members themselves, these servants would have first entered deep mourning, and later second mourning.

Evidence from the Washington and Custis families indicates that they followed the customary practice of wearing special clothing to signify their loss, starting with first mourning, and concluding with second mourning. After the death of Martha Washington's first husband, Daniel Parke Custis in July of 1757, his young widow ordered mourning clothes for herself, her three-year old son, and a number of the domestic slaves. By the following year, however, she was ready to carry on with life, ordering "One Genteel suite of clothes for my self to be grave but not Extravagent nor to be mourning." Almost twenty years later, about three weeks after the death of Martha Washington's daughter, Patsy, her older brother, John Parke Custis, wrote from his college in New York to comfort his mother, assuring her that both he and his servant Joe, who was a slave, had been put into "deep Mourning." A few days after this, George Washington sent to England for a number of articles, which he asked to be sent "by the first Ship to this River as many of the Articles will be wanted by the time they can arrive: among which the Second Mourning for Miss Custis, who we had the misfortune to loose.. .will be necessary." Among the articles purchased for Martha Washington at that time were: a black silk sacque [a type of dress] and coat "prop'r for Second Mourning"; fashionable linen, including two caps, to accompany the dress and coat; a white silk bonnet; eight pairs of women's white kid leather mitts, four pair of white kid gloves, and two pair of mitts and two pair of gloves of washed leather; "I handsome Fan prop'r for Second Mourning"; and 6 pair of Callimanca pumps. George Washington ordered for himself two pair of doeskin gloves, four pair of white French kid leather gloves, a

beaver hat, and a "Suit of Second Mourning." A few weeks later, he also ordered "A Genteel Mourning Sword, with Belt Swivels." A mourning sword which belonged to George Washington, as well as a buckle from his mourning sword, are part of the collections at Mount Vernon.

The account books maintained to record expenses in George Washington's executive mansion contain references to the purchase of fabrics associated with mourning, which can sometimes be identified with various losses within the family. At the death of Washington's mother in the summer of 1789, black cockades, sword knots, and armbands were acquired from a Mrs. Daubeny for the men in the president's household, including the male domestics, and official entertaining was cancelled for the period of one week. In order to comply with a Congressional resolution dating back to 1774, however, Washington did not go into full mourning for his mother. This decision won him praise from the newspapers, which noted that the country had been drifting away from the rather spartan commemorations of death, which had been followed during the war, when Congress had resolved that "on the death of any relation or friend, none of us, or any of our families, will go into any further mourning-dress, than a black crape or ribbon on the arm or hat, for gentlemen, and a black ribbon and necklace for ladies, and we will discontinue the giving of gloves and scarves at funerals." In both February and March of 1793, crepe was purchased at a time when the family was grieving the death of George Washington's nephew, George Augustine Washington, after a long bout with tuberculosis. References to the acquisition of two pairs of black silk hose for the president in January of 1794 and of four black silk handkerchiefs and a pair of hose for the servants in October of the same year have not yet be linked to any specific death or deaths,

but given the size of the family, that may be possible with further research.

The principal members of the family, of course, wore mourning after George Washington's death in 1799. At least some already may have been wearing mourning when he died; according to one family member, George Washington's last remaining brother had died just a few weeks before and Mrs. Washington had just learned of the death of her only remaining sister. Suits of mourning clothes, with appropriate buttons, were purchased almost immediately for Lawrence Lewis, who was Nelly's husband, and George Washington Parke Custis, Mrs. Washington's grandson, both of whom were both away from home. Thomas Law, who was married to Nelly's sister, Eliza, sent his servant into Alexandria for mourning clothes two days after the death. In March 1800, secretary Tobias Lear contacted Clement Biddle in Philadelphia about purchasing pairs of long black kid gloves, long black silk gloves, and black kid shoes for Martha Washington. Among the collections at Mount Vernon are a miniature portrait of the widowed Martha Washington wearing a black lace shawl and a white bonnet trimmed with black ribbon, painted in 1801 by Robert Field, as well as a similar black lace shawl that belonged to her.

In keeping with customs of the period, a number of the Mount Vernon slaves and hired white servants were fitted out with mourning clothes after George Washington's death. Two days after Washington died, farm manager James Anderson went to Alexandria "to get a number of things preparatory for the funeral." At the same time, mourning was ordered "for the Family Domestic and Overseers." Additional details concerning what was purchased can be found in surviving bills submitted after the funeral. One such manuscript, dated December 23rd, from

Jonathan and James Scott, indicates that "In respect to the memory of Genl George Washington, it was thought necessary that the family should all ware mourning, that is the Manager Overseers & servants about the House." In addition to two family members, Albin Rawlins who was George Washington's clerk or secretary, overseer Roger Ferrell, gardener William Spence, and a Mr. Gassett received suits of mourning; overseer Moses Dowdal was given a coat & vest; and suits were made, as well, for several of the slaves in the mansion, and for Davy, a 56-year-old slave, who was the overseer at Washington's Muddy Hole Farm. There is a second bill from the same date from William Bowie, which indicates that suits, presumably of mourning, were made for Tobias Lear, overseer George Rawlins, for two of the slaves, and that Bowie also provided a pair of breeches for Mr. Dowdal, presumably because the first-named firm did not have the fabric or manpower to supply Dowdal's trousers, with everything else they had to do. Three of the male slaves--Frank Lee, the butler, Christopher Sheels, Washington's valet, and Marcus, a teenager, who was a waiter in the mansion--whose jobs would have made them quite visible during the funeral, also were given appropriate shoes for mourning.

Younger members of the Washington-Custis family appear to have followed the customary practice of wearing mourning. A small watercolor done by Martha Washington's 17-year-old granddaughter Nelly, in her grief over the death of her cousin Frances Bassett Washington Lear in 1796, depicts a young woman weeping at a funeral monument, with a small dog at her feet. Presumably Nelly and her little spaniel, that woman is shown wearing a black, high-waisted gown. As an adult, through the many losses in her life, Nelly Custis Lewis frequently asked her Philadelphia friend, Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, to send her

articles of mourning clothing from the city. Even while still in Philadelphia, as she was waiting to bury her daughter Agnes, Nelly sent a note to Elizabeth, along with her bonnet, that she wanted “to have my leghorn dyed & dress’d with crape,” so that it could “be made decent.” Several years later, in December of the years 1825 and 1826, Nelly wrote about sending shawls to the city to have them professionally dyed black, so “that it will not rub off on my clothes; as home dying generally does.” She asked for help getting shoes several times, hoping, in one order for six pair of black morocco, 4 pair of best black prunelle [a heavy woolen fabric], and two pairs of “thick spotted silk black.” A little over a year later, she asked to have six additional pairs sent to her at Woodlawn; that order included “3 pair finest & best black prunelle strong and well sewed,” 1 pair “handsomest lead color’d prunelle,” perhaps as second mourning, and 2 pair “best black danish satin.”



The Washington Family, ” engraving by Edward Savage, after his own painting, published in Philadelphia and London, 1798.

In addition to the mourning clothing one wore, it was also possible to signal one’s emotional state from a greater distance. The Washingtons are known to have expressed their grief through the stationary and writing accessories they used. For example, Martha Washington’s son, John Parke Custis, who was away at college when his sister died, knew immediately

from the appearance of the letter George Washington sent that it carried devastating news. As he later told his mother: “last Thursday.. I receiv’d Pappa’s melancholy Letter, giving an account of my dear & only Sister’s Death. I myself met the Post, & brought the sad Epistle to Doctor Cooper who I beg’d to open his Letter immediately, the Direction I did not know, but the Seal I knew too well to be deceived.” The family purchased special paper--“½ Rheam best large Folio Pap’r Mourning”--on the occasion of Patsy’s death. The wax seals used on surviving letters shows that the Washingtons typically used black wax to seal their correspondence for a period after a death, which varied depending on the degree of relationship with the deceased, a practice alluded to in the above-mentioned letter from John Parke Custis concerning the death of his sister. It appears, for instance, that George Washington was probably in mourning for his brother, John Augustine Washington, who died in early January of 1787, for a period of six months: in June of 1787, he wrote a letter to his friend, Eliza Powel and sealed it with black wax, while in a letter to her husband, written late in the following month, the seal was red. Just a month before his own death, George Washington put a black seal on a letter to Colonel Levin Powell, signifying that he was in mourning for his brother Charles Washington, who had died six weeks earlier, in mid-September, 1799. Following George Washington’s death, Tobias Lear, who wrote many letters for the household in this period, used black wax with the seal featuring the Washington coat-of-arms. In this case, Lear probably was using some of the “Black Wafers” purchased by Albin Rawlins, Washington’s clerk, on Monday, December 16th, 1799. The custom of using black wax to seal letters after a death in the family was followed also by Martha Washington’s granddaughter Nelly at Woodlawn in the nineteenth century.

Other signs might be used on the exterior of a house to signal to passers-by and would-be visitors that the people within were grieving. Among the artifacts burned in the 1871 fire at the museum of the Alexandria Masonic lodge was “the crape which floated from the door of his home [Mount Vernon] to tell the sad news of his death.” In addition to the crape on the door, there may also have been a hatchment or funeral escutcheon, which was a painted wood or canvas armorial device, bearing the coat-of-arms of the deceased, which traditionally would be fixed to the exterior of the house for several months, while the family was in mourning, and then would be transferred to the church where the body had been buried. There is a fragment of cloth from what is said to have been Washington’s funeral hatchment at the National Museum of American History. The use of hatchments came to America with the British colonists, and a number of complete ones survive in Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Massachusetts, Kentucky, and Virginia.



“Apotheosis of Washington” engraving by David Edwin, after Rembrandt Peale, Philadelphia, c. 1800-01.

In conclusion, eighteenth and nineteenth century Americans tried to find ways to cope with their grief in a more open and healthy fashion than we do today. Instead of ignoring or downplaying the loss of a loved one, people adhered to a set of customs or rituals, which acknowledged and followed the path of what modern psychologists tell us is typical for the grief process. For a given period of time, depending on the degree of closeness with the deceased, the decoration on the outside of a person’s house, their clothing, and even the letters and seals they used in correspondence with the outside world, quietly and, without the need for a lot of painful explanation, allowed a person to make a statement about how they felt and, at the same time, let the world know to be gentle with them or understanding of their emotional state. Certainly a very delicate way of handling a painful, and potentially awkward, situation.

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