



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on December 11, 2009

## George Washington's First Final Farewell

A generation after George Washington's Christmastime farewell to his troops and to the Congress who commissioned him in 1775, Clement Clarke Moore penned the iconic poem he called "A Visit From St. Nicholas," but known to most as "'Twas the Night Before Christmas."

The images described by Moore have become the commonly accepted notion of the symbols of the holiday. However, the reality of Christmas in George Washington's day was very different. As he sat with his wife in his command tent in Newburgh, New York, the general reluctantly sent her on ahead and promised solemnly that he would be home in time to pour the cordial in her glass. Mrs. Washington knew that her husband genuinely longed for the warmth of the hearth of his Southern home, and she accordingly set out toward their homestead.



For his part, the retiring general faced enduring a month-long sojourn before he could rejoin his wife at Mt. Vernon. If Washington was going to keep his promise to Martha to be by her side on Christmas morning, he had a few important tasks to accomplish. First, he was to accept the transfer of control of New York City from the English; next, he would have to say goodbye to his men; third, he would honor key citizens and supporters by dining and dancing with them in their homes along the way; next, and probably most important in Washington's mind, he would officially and finally (he thought) resign his commission and give his final report to Congress then meeting in Annapolis, Maryland — and he would do it all in less than one month. The first stop on the road to hearth and home was New York City.

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On September 3, 1783, the Treaty of Paris was ratified by British negotiators in France, and the wheels of the occupiers' departure from the newly recognized American Republic were set in motion. British troops still controlled New York City (in fact, it would be a decade before all British armed forces abandoned forts around the Great Lakes) and, as Commander-in-Chief of the victorious American army, overseeing the English evacuation of New York City and the surrounding boroughs was Washington's responsibility. In truth, there was very little Washington needed to do to secure command of New York City, as the English stationed there were as anxious to get home as he was. The redcoats quit their American barracks and outposts with all reasonable haste and boarded ships bound for their longed-for island home. Washington made requisite appearances at meetings with British officials, but the transfer was peaceful and mostly ceremonial — much to the preoccupied commander's delight.

While accomplishing his necessary duties in New York, Washington delivered the first of several farewells. This one was to what remained of his cadre of commanders and took place on December 4,



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1783, at the popular public house, Fraunces Tavern. Fraunces Tavern in New York City was owned by Samuel “Black Sam” Fraunces and was situated at the corner of Pearl and Broad Streets. Its proprietor had named his bar the “Queen’s Head Inn,” in honor of King George III’s consort, Charlotte. Locals disliked the loyalist-sounding name and simply called the establishment by its owner’s surname.

The parties with American dignitaries were finished, the hands of local leaders were shaken, the celebratory fireworks were shot, the last stragglers of the British army had set sail for England, and the city was left in the management of Governor Clinton’s civil government and under the protection of the small American army (about 500 men) as yet under the command of the already heroic and terribly exhausted General George Washington.

Anxious to get some road behind him in the daylight, Washington awoke earlier than usual, and in turn woke his host and asked Fraunces to prepare the Long Room for a luncheon for the general and his officers to be held that day at noon.

Washington entered the Long Room at the stroke of 12:00 and, despite his estimates, found the room packed to capacity by a devoted and admiring corps of officers. Washington was dressed in his best uniform (blue with buff trim and bright brass buttons). He quickly surveyed the faces that in turn focused, each and every one, on the face of their commander and the man universally considered the liberator of a nation. For his part, Washington recognized and rejoiced that all men in attendance were in word and deed officers and gentlemen, for they had all sacrificed to the furthest extent of their means and endured a roster of remarkable hardships together as brothers-in-arms. No exceptions, not even the general himself.

As always, the assembled veterans deferred to their commanding officer, waiting for his signal to begin eating the cold cuts and drinking the brandywine set out dutifully by Fraunces. Washington, feeling himself fill with fraternal affection for his fellow officers, motioned for the men to tuck in to the fare and fill their glasses.

As wine was poured into the last glass, Washington swallowed hard, inclined his head as if simultaneously suppressing tears, and focused his swirling thoughts. Then, with some effort to overcome the emotion, he raised his glass with his right hand, noticeably choked back tears, and offered the following heartfelt toast that was as dignified and inspiring as the speaker himself. “With a heart filled with love and gratitude, I now take leave of you. I most devoutly wish that your latter days may be as prosperous and happy as your former ones have been glorious and honorable.” The men tried clumsily to clink glasses, as they were overcome with debilitating melancholy at the thought of never seeing their retiring commander again.

Washington’s eyes welled with tears that testified to his genuine emotion, and he asked the congregated soldiers to “come and take me by the hand.” Obediently, one by one beginning with the portly and powerful hero of Ticonderoga, Henry Knox (he being the senior officer), the solemn soldiers approached Washington, clasped his hand, and kissed him on the cheek in an unashamed display of manly filial admiration. The details of this touching tableau were described in a letter by one of the attendees, Lieutenant Colonel Tallmadge of the Second Continentals:

Such a scene of sorrow and weeping I had never before witnessed.... It was too affecting to be of long continuance — for tears of deep sensibility filled every eye — and the heart seemed so full, that it was wont to burst from its wonted abode. 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



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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.

After individually embracing and saluting each of his men, General George Washington turned to exit the Long Room and paused at the door to wave goodbye for the last time. Washington's plan to leave early was vexed by the tearful and emotionally wrenching farewell gathering at Fraunces Tavern. He would leave that scene, albeit reluctantly, and walk back to the home where he was staying to rest in anticipation of setting out for Philadelphia early the next morning. Time was slipping away, and he would suffer no delay in his appointed course, despite undoubtedly being spent by the poignant events of the day.

It was four days from New York City to Philadelphia; Washington traveled most of the way on his horse Nelson, but spent one and a half days rolling along uncomfortably in a carriage. On his way to Philadelphia, Washington passed near the scene of one of his few notable victories, the Christmas night in 1776 when the frostbitten and nearly naked American army, bravely and in defiance of the impediment of inclemency, crossed the Delaware River, surprising the much-feared Hessian mercenaries who were sleeping (or passed out after a night of Christmas cavorting) and completely unaware of the American advance. The skirmish was a rout: 106 Hessians were killed or wounded, with another 900 or so taken prisoner. Miraculously, only four American lives were lost in the battle — two of the deaths were caused by exposure, the men having camped all night without coat or cover and crossed the icy stream in their bare feet.

By 1783, seven years after the Yuletide fight, the events, Washington's bold action, and the extraordinary valor of the men who fought there had already achieved the burnish of legend. It is easy to understand, therefore, why, upon his arrival in Trenton (the town near the battlefield), Washington was hailed as a hero and importuned to recount the details of the near-mythic Christmas clash.

Having satisfied his New Jersey admirers' desire for his company and his anecdotes, Washington resumed his trek toward Philadelphia, crossing the icy Delaware just below Trenton, this time as a lauded hero, not as an uneasy but confident commander of a bedraggled band of cold and courageous patriots.

On December 8, Washington and his escorts reached the northern outskirts of Philadelphia, resolutely resigned to endure the parades, parties, and pats on the backs from devotees and dignitaries. Such assemblages were to be expected, as all along the road since his journey began well-wishers would ride out to meet the renowned general and then race back into town proclaiming his imminent arrival.

Philadelphia was no exception. On the ninth of the month, the esteemed John Dickinson (called the "Penman of the Revolution" for his authorship of many crucial early documents defending the cause of American liberty) and the state's Supreme Executive Council issued a statement welcoming Washington to Pennsylvania and praising his service to his country, wishing him that "the best and greatest of Beings, in His good time, bestow upon you the felicities of that to come."

Washington spoke to the General Assembly at the brick State House and thanked Dickinson and the Council for their gracious encomium. He told the gathered state delegates, "I consider the approbation of the representatives of a free and virtuous people as the most enviable reward that can ever be conferred on a public character" — an august and frank response from a fatigued Washington, who, although genuinely appreciative of the tributes, wanted nothing more than to retire to his beloved home and forever cease being a "public character."



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Having finally departed Philadelphia on December 15, graciously ignoring the innumerable petitions for audiences, appearances, and lectures, Washington rode on for Annapolis and his supreme appointment with Congress, escorted by John Dickinson on his left hand and the French Minister on his right.

As the snow fell and quickly accumulated, Washington's Philadelphia-based companions turned back toward home for fear of being stranded by roads rendered impassable by tall drifts and blinding blizzards. Washington, with his much-vaunted resolve steadfastly fixed on fulfilling his promise to be home by the 25th, continued on right through the teeth of the winter storm.

Washington's travel weariness was by now nearly debilitating and could only be overcome by uplifting thoughts of his home and wife and the rest and revelry that Christmas would bring. On December 19, the general headed out for Annapolis from Baltimore. Again, his progress was delayed by a steady stream of greeters on horseback approaching his entourage for miles outside of the city limits. The citizens accompanied Washington all the way to his lodgings downtown.

After a fretful night's rest, Washington awoke and penned a brief missive to Thomas Mifflin, the President of the Congress, requesting therein permission to relinquish his command to Mifflin alone or to at most a small committee of Congressmen, instead of suffering through another grand and theatrical "official" reception. Despite his position of unmatched honor and reverence, however, not even George Washington could avoid a thoroughly dramatic surrender of power — a scene that would bolster his widely held reputation as a modern-day Cincinnatus, willingly removing his hand from the sword and gladly returning it to the plow, having eliminated the threat to liberty.

Congress and Mifflin informed the disappointed Commander-in-Chief that there would be a public reception with him as the guest of honor on December 22, and Congress' formal acceptance of his resignation would occur the following day at noon.

The program for Washington's congressional reception was prepared by no less a luminary than his fellow Virginian, Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson knew that although Washington was honestly desirous of a simple ceremony, he was also a man sensitive to the gravity that historic moments merited and should rightly be afforded. Accordingly, Jefferson expertly choreographed, blocked, and scripted every movement and every utterance of the key characters. According to the script, after everyone was seated in his assigned spot and absolute silence was achieved, Mifflin would rise and address General Washington thusly, "Sir, the United States in Congress assembled are prepared to receive your communication." Whereupon Washington would deliver his resignation speech and then remain standing while Mifflin replied on behalf of the entire delegation.

Before the resignation, though, there was the party. In a custom instituted when independence was declared, 13 toasts were offered at all public meetings. Washington's Annapolis reception was no exception. Among the toasts were two to France, one to Holland, and one to the king of Sweden, in appreciation for the aid provided by these allies to the cause of American freedom.

Among the distinguished party-goers were Jefferson, the Dutch Ambassador, the French Ambassador, and even a few English aristocrats curious about the American commander. Dinner and drinks were enjoyed by all, followed by a ball where a band played reels and minuets and women with "Liberty Curls" (13 curls at the back of the neck in commemoration of the state of the union) danced with nattily dressed men until the wee hours of the morning. Washington, always a gracious guest, is reported to have "danced every set."

In defiance of the sluggishness he may have felt after such a long night of dancing, Washington awoke



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early on December 23 in order to afford himself enough time to go over one last time the final draft of his speech that was to be delivered at noon. He collected his papers and called his aides, and together they mounted horses and rode to the Maryland State House, his final farewell and the last stop before home.

Upon his arrival at the State House and upon entering the room per Jefferson's stage direction, Washington saw a standing-room-only crowd, anxious to be present at the making of history. The general took his seat, rose at the appropriate cue, and, with the written text of his speech rattling in his nervous hands and a voice undulating with emotion, the "Father of His Country" delivered his momentous resignation declaration. "Mr. President, the great events on which my resignation depended having at length taken place; I have now the honor of offering my sincere Congratulations to Congress and of presenting myself before them to surrender into their hands the trust committed to me, and to claim the indulgence of retiring from the Service of my Country." After appropriate recognition of those without whose assistance victory would have been impossible, Washington concluded his remarks, "Having now finished the work assigned me, I retire from the great theatre 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."

At this, Washington pulled out of his pocket the parchment commission from 1775 and handed it to Mifflin — mission accomplished. This moment in the history of the inchoate American Republic was remarkable in that it was a peaceful and voluntary surrender of power by a general with nearly unassailable popularity and endowed with the unalienable loyalty of an army, into the hands of the duly elected civil government. Washington's peaceable and uncompelled delivery of his command evinced his dedication to the immutable principles of liberty in spite of offers of a throne and crown. This one act is but a snapshot in a voluminous album of similar scenes that bore witness to Washington's nobility, humility, unwavering adherence to the immutable principles of republicanism, and possession of all the classical republican virtues.

A general no more, George Washington moved hastily toward home and the welcoming arms of his beloved Martha. Washington and company ferried across the Potomac and entered Virginia with the verdant familiar landscapes of home clearly in sight. Washington turned off the main road and onto the mile-long driveway leading to the manor house. Washington's heart must have leapt to see candles burning in the windows of Mt. Vernon, greeting their tired but triumphant master on his promised arrival on Christmas Eve.

Having had his fill of parties and soirees and having endured all the pomp accompanying the performing of his official duties over the past month, George Washington arranged with Martha to have an intimate family Christmas with a meal of turkey, hog, cider, and wine, attended only by step-children, nieces, nephews, and other close kin. In the commercial meccas of New York City and Philadelphia, Washington had purchased presents for everyone. There were a locket and umbrella for Martha; books and spinning toys for the boys; and tea sets, grocer's stores, and gingerbread toys for the girls. In the company of this tiny but thrilled throng, Washington, content at last, would share stories and a feast worthy of the man enshrined as the "Father of His Country," but now more happily and proudly serving as no more or less than the father of his family.



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