



The Long Farewell: Americans Mourn the Death of George Washington

Gerald E. Kahler

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The news of the death of George Washington at Mount Vernon on December 14, 1799, was reported to have been "felt as an electric shock throughout the union." Martha Washington gave permission for Congress to have her husband's body reinterred under a marble monument to be constructed in the new capital in Washington, D.C. Grieving Americans organized and participated in over four hundred funeral processions and memorial services during the sixty-nine-day mourning period that culminated on February 22, 1800, the National Day of Mourning.

Washington's death came in a highly contentious period in American political history, and a variety of groups and individuals tried to take advantage of the occasion to advance their own agendas. Federalist officials, including President John Adams and Alexander Hamilton, themselves at odds on a number of issues, took a leading role in ceremonies that included mock funerals with empty caskets orchestrated by Hamilton, who also used the occasion to advocate for a large standing army. Although Jefferson and his Democratic Republicans were about to knock the Federalists out of political contention, in what Jefferson termed the "Revolution of 1800," in 1799 Federalists predominated in ceremonial and print commemorations of Washington. Religious leaders, whose moral authority was on the wane, tried to Christianize Washington, while Masons used the most illustrious member of their secret brotherhood to rehabilitate an image tarnished by charges of religious infidelity and association with the excesses of the French Revolution. Women of various stations and political stripes also took advantage of the occasion to help legitimize their participation in public life.

The biographical sketches included in over three hundred eulogies provide a unique historical perspective on who George Washington was in the eyes of his contemporaries.

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