

## **George Washington's Hard Death Shows the Limits of Medicine in His Time Health/Science**

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**Modern medicine may not have cured the common cold but at least the palliation process assures relief from the worst symptoms. Only about two centuries ago, even the best physicians and procedures could do nothing to avoid the death of the first American president two days after what started as a common cold. Photo: An illustration of Washington's imagined deathbed scene, painted about 50 years after his death. ([Wikimedia Commons](#))**

By [Kat Eschner](#) for SMITHSONIAN.COM, Dec 14, 2017 When George Washington left office at 65, he was the picture of health—at least for a man of his age living in the 18th century. Less than three years later, he was dead of a sudden illness that was centuries away from being treatable.

By all accounts, George Washington's final hours were painful and frightening, though he had been healthy just days before and hadn't sustained any grievous injuries. His death, which took place "a little more than 30 months into his retirement," [writes](#) Howard Markel for PBS News Hour, illustrates how suddenly illness could strike even the most wealthy—and how little doctors were able to do about it. The weather was pretty miserable on December 12, 1799: Freezing rain, snow and hail poured down on Washington, then 67, and his employees and slaves. The former president spent most of the day on horseback working outside, and he was wet when he came in late for dinner. He was proud of his reputation for punctuality and didn't take the time to change before sitting down to the meal, writes Markel. The next day, he "did not go out as usual," [writes](#) White McKenzie Wallenborn for the *Washington Papers*, "for he had taken cold and complained of a severe sore throat." "He was suddenly overcome by what is believed to have been a rare throat infection," [writes](#) historian Christine A. Smith. "If the diagnosis from our contemporary perspective is correct, without antibiotics he could not have survived regardless of the treatment." Even as late as 1900, before the advent of antibiotics, Americans "could primarily expect to die from pneumonia, influenza, tuberculosis, gastrointestinal infections, heart disease and cerebrovascular disease (strokes)." Additionally, superstitions of the late 1700s held that wet hair and clothes actually [caused colds](#), a belief that still persists. Aware of this, the sick Washington got his affairs in order. In July of that year, writes Smith, he'd written a new will arranging what would happen to his "great wealth" after he died: "the huge amount of real property, numerous investments, material goods and 124 slaves at the Mount Vernon farms." He ensured that Martha Washington, his wife, had the relevant will in her possession. By 3 am on December 14, he was really sick and he had feverish chills. When the sun came up, writes Wallenborn, his secretary "found the General breathing with difficulty and hardly able to utter a word intelligently." Two remedies for his congestion were tried that day: a mixture of molasses, vinegar and butter and a gargle of vinegar and sage tea. He couldn't take either and nearly died of suffocation while attempting to use them. Over the course of his illness, writes Wallenborn, he'd been bled more than once—another common remedy of the time—and lost about five pints of blood. He died that night, between ten and eleven p.m., having been healthy only two days prior. Although Smithsonian has [written about](#) the difficulty of diagnosing historical figures,

based on accounts of his symptoms, Wallenborn, who is a medical doctor, believes that he had acute epiglottitis, "a severe, rapidly progressing infection of the epiglottis and surrounding tissues that may be quickly fatal because of sudden respiratory (airway) obstruction by the inflamed structures." Whatever it was, Washington's death was terrifying, painful and undignified. However, unlike many other people during this period, he was treated by not one, but three doctors, as well as attended by servants and slaves and his own family. He was also old for his time, and had enjoyed a long, full life. He was buried on December 18, 1799, at Mount Vernon, his plantation. [hellip;] [https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-n ... icine-his-time-180967531/](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/george-washington-died-at-67-but-not-before-his-time-180967531/)