From 1786 to 1799, Tobias Lear was an indispensable aide to George Washington, America’s indispensable man. Lear lived with the Washingtons during much of that period and eventually married into the family. He was present when Washington died on December 14, 1799, and left what is regarded as the most accurate account of the first president’s last hours.

Lear’s life was sometimes difficult and marked with tragedies, as his biographer Ray Brighton described in The Checkered Career of Tobias Lear (Portsmouth Marine Society, 1985). He was widowed twice, struggled with debts and business failures, once embezzled money from Washington, and endured bitter political attacks by Federalists. Lear committed suicide in his garden on October 11, 1816, leaving no note or explanation.

Lear was born on September 19, 1762, in Portsmouth, N.H., to Tobias Lear IV, a sea captain and farmer, and Mary Stillson Lear. He attended the Dummer Academy in Byfield, Mass. (today’s The Governor’s Academy). Instead of serving in the Revolutionary War, he attended Harvard University from 1779 to 1783.

After graduating, he toured England and France. Back home in late 1784, he taught school until his friend General Benjamin Lincoln recommended him to Washington, who needed a live-in secretary and bookkeeper at Mount Vernon. Lear began working for Washington on May 29, 1786, for $200 a year, plus room, board and laundry, according to “Tobias Lear, S.P.U.S.: First Secretary to the President,” by P. Bradley Nutting (Presidential Studies Quarterly, Fall 1994).

The Washingtons treated him as part of the family. He dealt with the general’s voluminous correspondence, handled financial accounts and was even sent by Washington to western Pennsylvania to collect rents from tenants. He also tutored Martha Washington’s grandchildren.

A Scrupulous Manager

After the Electoral College chose Washington as the first president on April 6, 1789, Lear went to New York City to prepare the executive mansion for the Washingtons’ arrival in the capital. He helped coordinate details of the inauguration and ordered a brown suit made of Connecticut wool for the president-to-be to wear at the ceremony, Nutting wrote.

After Washington’s inauguration, Lear added official government duties to his previous responsibilities as a private secretary, including presidential correspondence, daily schedules, official events and patronage appointments. He signed official letters as “Tobias Lear, Secretary to the President of the United States,” or “S.P.U.S.”
A portrait of Tobias Lear, painted sometime around the 1780s.
He scrupulously managed the president's official accounts—Nutting noted that “not even the President received any money without going through him.” Lear also arranged Washington's goodwill tour of New England in the fall of 1789 and accompanied him on the triumphal procession.

When the capital relocated to Philadelphia in 1790, Lear again went ahead to arrange the household. Lear also married his longtime sweetheart, Mary “Polly” Long, in 1790. Along with several other aides, the Lears lived in the executive mansion, where Polly and Martha became friends. When their only child, Benjamin Lincoln Lear (March 11, 1792–October 1, 1832), was born, Washington was his godfather, Brighton stated.

Though he remained close to the Washingtons, Lear resigned in June 1793 hoping to find his fortune as a partner in a business named T. Lear & Co. Tragedy struck in July when Polly died in Philadelphia's yellow fever epidemic, which killed some 5,000 people. (See the March/April 2021 issue of American Spirit for more on the yellow fever epidemic.) Lear spent much of the next 12 months in Europe, trying to secure business for the new firm.

In August 1795, Lear officially joined the first family, marrying Frances “Fanny” Bassett Washington, the widow of his friend, George Augustine Washington, and Martha Washington's niece. She had three children from her previous marriage: Anna Maria (April 3, 1788–January 23, 1816), George Fayette Washington (January 17, 1790–September 6, 1867), and Charles Augustine Washington (November 3, 1791–July 5, 1811).

In 1787, Washington had given Fanny and her first husband property called Walnut Tree Farm at Mount Vernon, and the new family settled in there. However, their happiness was short-lived—Fanny died from tuberculosis in March 1796.

After Fanny’s death, her brother Burwell Bassett adopted Anna Maria. The president at first planned to adopt George Fayette, but decided it was better not to split up the two young boys and left them in Lear's care. Lear’s mother, Mary, came down from New Hampshire to care for Benjamin and his stepbrothers at the farm.

Business Failures and Embezzlement

Lear managed Washington’s accounts with care, but struggled with his own finances. His company had lost heavily on speculating in property in the new Federal City—today’s Washington, D.C.—and he was deeply in debt.

In October 1797, Lear asked Washington for a $3,000 loan. But Washington was also short on cash and refused in a letter: “Such a loan would place me in exactly the same situation you represent yourself to be ... unprepared to face my own engagements,” Washington wrote, though he did agree to lend Lear up to $1,000, according to Nutting.

A few months later, a desperate Lear pocketed money from some of Washington’s renters to stave off creditors. Washington discovered the embezzlement and severely upbraided Lear. Lear abjectly promised to repay him. “That does not remedy the evil,” Washington replied.

Despite his great disappointment in Lear, the two remained close. Brighton noted that even when Lear was not directly employed by Washington, the former president called on him to provide a number of services. In 1798, Washington appointed Lear as his military secretary during the Quasi-War crisis when the retired general agreed to lead an American army against France. The job carried the rank of colonel, which Lear used for the rest of his life.

Lear continued to work as Washington’s aide and was at Mount Vernon on December 12, 1799, when the ex-President developed a chill while out riding through his estate. Washington soon developed a fever, while his throat became inflamed and began to close, as Philander D. Chase described in “‘The Debt Which Must All Pay’: Tobias Lear’s Diary Account of George Washington’s Death” (Pennsylvania Legacies, November 2004).

Lear stayed by his bedside, even lying on the bed at times to help the dying Washington shift position. Washington instructed Lear to put his papers in order, take care of his financial accounts, and wait two or three days before burying his body to ensure he was dead.

“His patience, fortitude and resignation never forsook him for a moment. In his distress he uttered not a sigh nor a complaint,” Lear wrote in his diary. Realizing his end was near, Washington observed “that as it was the debt which must all pay, he looked to the event with perfect resignation.”

Lear arranged the funeral and stayed on at Mount Vernon for two years to finalize Washington’s affairs and prepare the general’s papers for his nephew, Justice Bushrod Washington, to whom they had been bequeathed. The justice discussed co-writing a biography with Lear, but ultimately selected then-Secretary of State John Marshall as the author.

Missing Documents

Lear’s handling of the papers later generated considerable controversy. Despite political differences, Washington and Thomas Jefferson had long been frequent correspondents, yet the flow of their letters suddenly ceased in the summer of 1796.
The lack of any further letters between the two raised suspicions that Lear, as a longtime Democrat-Republican, might have removed letters that would be politically embarrassing to Jefferson. Brighton wrote that he believed Lear did remove the letters. As evidence, he cited comments Lear made in a letter to Alexander Hamilton.

On January 2, 1800, Hamilton wrote Lear: “In whose hands are his papers gone? Our very confidential situation will not permit this to be a point of indifference to me.” In his January 16, 1800, reply, Lear assured him no one else had yet seen the papers. “There are, as you must well know, among the several letters and papers, many which every public and private consideration should withhold from further inspection.”

Lear also asked Hamilton, “if any of the General’s late military papers are necessary to be handed to yourself or any other person,” to protect military matters. Lear added that he intended to put the sensitive material aside and “on delivering them to Judge Washington shall tell him how sacred their contents are and have no doubt but in his hands they will be a sacred deposit.”

However, Lear turned the papers directly over to Marshall, and the missing letters have never been found, according to Brighton. The firestorm eventually died down, but ardent Federalists such as Timothy Pickering continued to attack Lear over the missing documents until well after his death.

**Diplomacy, Pirates and Political Attacks**

In 1801, Lear began a diplomatic career when President Thomas Jefferson appointed him as American consul to Saint-Domingue, which had broken free from France. The posting was brief: The French reconquered the island in 1802 and expelled Lear.

On June 10, 1803, Jefferson appointed Lear consul general to North Africa, with orders to negotiate a peace treaty to end the first Barbary war and stop pirate raids on American shipping. A few days later, Lear married Frances Dandridge Henley, another of Martha Washington’s nieces and also nicknamed Fanny.

The couple sailed to Algiers aboard the USS Constitution, arriving at almost the same time that the American warship USS Philadelphia ran aground off the Tripoli harbor and was captured, along with about 300 crew members. For the next two years, Lear worked on negotiating their release. His efforts were complicated by William Eaton, a U.S. Army officer and rival, who wanted to replace Tripoli’s current ruler, Yusuf Karamanli, with his brother Ahmed, who was regarded as more pro-American.

Lear succeeded, but the terms of the 1805 Treaty of Tripoli set off another series of political attacks. Federalists were angry that he agreed to pay a $60,000 ransom. There was further outrage when it was learned he had also signed a secret article allowing Yusuf to continue to hold his brother’s family hostage, Brighton wrote. Eaton returned to the United States in 1805 and launched a full-scale attack on Lear’s performance.

Despite the controversy, Lear remained in the post until 1812, when the sultan ordered him out of the country. The posting had permitted Lear to engage in trade to supplement his salary, and he left financially secure for the first time in his life.

Just before the British burned Washington on August 24, 1814, President James Madison appointed him to an accountant’s position in the War Department, roughly equivalent to comptroller. Lear organized the effort to save as many army records as possible from the flames. Fortunately, his home near the Capitol was not burned.

Though he continued to draw criticism for his actions in Algiers and his handling of Washington’s papers, Lear’s life finally seemed promising. This made his suicide at home in his garden on October 11, 1816, all the more baffling and shocking to his family and friends. Frances Henley Lear survived Tobias by 40 years, dying on November 17, 1856. They had no children. Both are buried in the Congressional Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

Both Maria Washington and Charles Augustine Washington died before Lear’s suicide. George Fayette, who was 26 years old by this point, became a farmer in Virginia. Benjamin Lincoln Lear became a successful attorney in Washington. He married twice. His first wife died in childbirth, as did the child. He remarried, and he and his wife had a daughter, Louisa Lincoln Lear. The specter that seemed to hang over the Lear family struck again when Benjamin succumbed to cholera in 1832, only a year after his daughter was born. **