

## Tobias Lear

(19 Sep 1762 – 11 Oct 1816)

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*The National Intelligencer, August 2, 1814*

Tobias Lear, has, we learn, been appointed by the President to the office of Accountant of the War Department, vice William Simmons removed.

Col. Tobias Lear



*The National Intelligencer, October 12, 1816.*

In this city yesterday, suddenly, Col. Tobias Lear, Accountant of the Department of War. His private life was exemplary and he had filled various public stations under successive administrations with deserved reputation. His loss is deeply lamented by his family and friends.

*Source(?)*

### **Tomb of Tobias Lear in the City of Washington**

This is a view of the tomb of Tobias Lear in an unfrequented corner of Congressional Cemetery, Washington. Few persons know of this man. Let the epitaph, cut in the top slab, tell the story. It follows:

"Here lie the remains of Tobias Lear. He was early distinguished as the private secretary and familiar friend of the illustrious George Washington; and after having served his country with dignity, zeal and fidelity, in many honorable

stations, died accountant of the War Department October 11, 1816, aged fifty-four."

Lear, who was a New Englander, was called to Mount Vernon as tutor of the Custis children, the grandchildren of Mrs. Washington. He became private secretary to Washington. Essentially all that has been written of the last illness and death of Washington is based on Lear's narrative of that sad event. Lear was present at the death scene.

A wreath will be placed on the tomb by the Daughters of the American Revolution on February 22d.

Tobias Lear was born in 1762. From 1786 he was the private secretary of George Washington and resided at Mt. Vernon as a member of the family and tutor to Mrs. Washington's grandchildren. He received \$200 per year. He published "Observations on the River Potomac, The County Adjacent and the City of Washington" in 1793. He was present at Washington's bedside on his death and arranged his funeral. He received 360 acres in the will of George Washington. In 1802 he served as U.S. Consul to Santo Domingo and in 1804 as Counsel General at Algiers. In his later years he was a clerk at the War Department. He committed suicide October 11, 1816.

### *Dictionary of American Biography*

September 19, 1762 - October 11, 1816. Consular Officer. Son of Colonel Tobias Lear and Mary (Stilson) Lear; born at Portsmouth, N.H. His father was a prosperous shipmaster, and later a farmer. Tobias Lear graduated at Harvard in 1783, and traveled and studied in Europe. This led to his engagement as Private Secretary to General George Washington after his retirement to Mount Vernon in 1785, which position he held seven years, endearing himself to Washington and his family and becoming a life-long friend. While at Mount Vernon he published "Observations on the River Potomac,

the Country Adjacent, and the City of Washington" (1793), probably the earliest separate monograph on the District of Columbia.

In 1790 he married Mary Long of Portsmouth N.H., who died in 1793. He then went abroad carrying letters of introduction from Washington and Jefferson; returned in 1794 and settled in Alexandria, Va. Was elected President of the Potomac Canal Company in 1795, and that year married Frances (Bassett) Washington, a niece of Martha Washington and the widow of George Augustine, Washington's nephew. After her death, he married Frances Dandridge Henley, another niece of Mrs. Washington. In 1799, when war was imminent, Washington appointed him his military secretary, with rank of Colonel, and Lear remained with him until his death, and received a substantial legacy from him.

In 1801 he was appointed by President Jefferson as Consul at Santo Domingo, a difficult and dangerous post at that time. After General LeClerc, sent by Napoleon, took possession of the island, Lear was forced to return to America. He was then named Consul to Algiers, with power to negotiate a treaty with Tripoli and adjust affairs with any of the Barbary rulers. He was tactful and well suited for this work. He made a treaty with Morocco, kept peace with Algiers, and adjusted affairs with Tunisia.

Since the loss of the "Philadelphia", 300 prisoners had been held at Tripoli. A treaty had been discussed for two years, when suddenly, in June 1805, Lear signed an agreement with the Pasha acceding ransom for those American prisoners. This treaty was upheld by the Government, but became a political issue. Opponents of the administration felt that in view of the fleet being in the Mediterranean and land operations in progress under William Eaton, Navy Agent to the Barbary States, no money should have been provided. It is not known why he made this hasty treaty; perhaps because of seemingly groundless fear of the naval officers for the safety of the prisoners, because of his own "passion for peace", or because he felt certain of securing liberal terms at that time. He remained in Algiers until the beginning of the War of 1812, at which time the Bey, expecting the United States to be defeated by Great Britain, gave him summary orders to leave.

Arriving in Washington under the cloud of the ill-timed treaty with Tripoli, Lear found his diplomatic career at an end. He was made accountant for the War Department, and on October 11, 1816, he committed suicide, leaving no explanation of his deed.

*Ely, Selden Marvin, "The District of Columbia In The American Revolution and Patriots of the Revolutionary Period Who Are Interred in the District or In Arlington," Columbia Historical Society, Vol 21, pp. 128-154*

The remains of Tobias Lear, the private secretary of George Washington and foreign emissary, repose in Congressional Cemetery. Some reports include Lear as worthy of Revolutionary honors. He came of a patriot family and a "Tobias Lear" signed a petition to the State Committee of Safety from Portsmouth, N.H., May 5, 1777. Reliable biographies give the date of his birth September 19, 1762, and this would make his age such as to cast doubt on his signing the petition. The signature is probably that of his father, Capt. Tobias Lear, Sr. The career of Tobias Lear, Jr., seems to have begun after he was graduated from Harvard in 1783.