

GENERAL WASHINGTON'S FAREWELL TO HIS OFFICERS REVISITED



Actor Ian Kahn, who portrayed General George Washington in the AMC series "TURN: Washington's Spies," came to the Fraunces Tavern Museum on Dec. 3 to re-enact Washington's farewell to his officers, which took place at Fraunces Tavern on Dec. 4, 1783. (By Terese Loeb Kreuzer, Photos: Terese Loeb Kreuzer)

In semi-darkness, a tall man wearing a long cloak stood pensively next to the fireplace in the Long Room of Fraunces Tavern at 54 Pearl St. As the lights came up, he turned, threw his cloak onto a chair, and with barely restrained emotion addressed the other people in the room.

"With a heart full of love and gratitude, I now take leave of you," he said. "I most devoutly wish that your latter days may be as happy and prosperous as your former ones have been glorious and honorable."

The man in the cloak was Ian Kahn, who portrayed General George Washington in the AMC series "TURN: Washington's Spies" and the words that he spoke were what Washington actually said in the Long Room of Fraunces Tavern on Dec. 4, 1783 when he said goodbye to his officers.

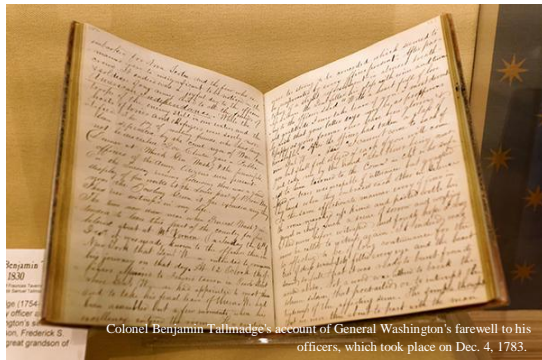
Fraunces Tavern is a re-creation of a tavern at the corner of Broad and Pearl Streets that played a momentous role in the American Revolution and its aftermath but no single day was more poignant in the tavern's centuries-old history than Dec. 4, 1783. After a struggle of around eight years, the Colonists had won the war. The last of the defeated British army had evacuated New York City on Nov. 25, 1783 as General Washington and his troops marched in. Washington's work was done.

On Dec. 4, General Washington invited the officers of the Continental Army to join him at Fraunces Tavern. Colonel Benjamin Tallmadge left an account of what happened that day.

Written in 1830, it is the only eyewitness account that exists. It is now on display in the Fraunces Tavern Museum.

"We had been assembled but a few moments when his excellency entered the room," Tallmadge wrote. "His emotions were too strong to be concealed, which seemed to be reciprocated by every officer present."

Tallmadge described General Washington filling his glass with wine amid an "almost breathless silence." Then he thanked those who stood before him and asked each of them to come to him and take his hand. "General Knox being nearest to him turned to the Commander-in-chief who, suffused in tears, was incapable of utterance but grasped his hand when they embraced each other in silence. In the same affectionate manner every officer in the room marched up and parted with his general in chief. Such a scene of sorrow and weeping I had never before witnessed and fondly hope I may never be called to witness again."



Kahn's portrayal of that leave-taking was enacted in front of a row of spectators, who stood in for the officers, and as the general had done, Kahn shook each of them by the hand. Then he answered questions.

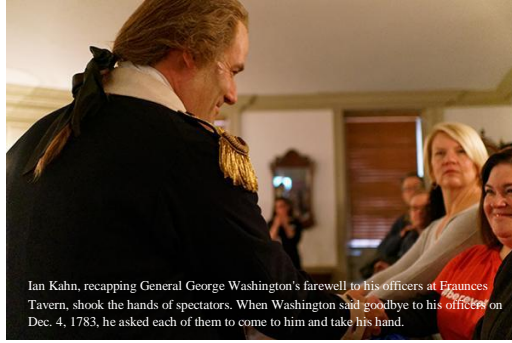
He had lived with General Washington for several years and had come to think of him as a great man who towered both literally and metaphorically over those around him. Washington was around 6 feet two inches tall, Kahn said, a giant for that time. Kahn, at 6 feet one inch tall, said that he had added an extra inch to the bottom of his heels to raise himself to Washington's height. Kahn, 45 years old, is about the same age that Washington was when he led the Continental Army.

Washington had triumphed. He could have had any role he wanted in the new nation. He could have asked to be made king. He could have been a dictator. But that's not what he wanted and not what he did.

Tallmadge concluded his account of what happened on Dec. 4, 1783 with these words: "The officers escorted Washington from the Tavern to the Whitehall wharf, where he boarded a barge that took him to Paulus Hook [now Jersey City], New Jersey. Washington continued to Annapolis, where the Continental Congress was meeting, and resigned his commission."

"It's important for us to be grateful for the country that we have and to understand where we've come from," Kahn reflected. "I'm concerned about the state of the nation in many different ways." He didn't elaborate on the nature of his concerns.

But there was this to think about. In the room above the Long Room, the Fraunces Tavern Museum's displays include the medal of the Society of the Cincinnati, hanging from a blue and white ribbon. A sign next to it explains, "The Society of the Cincinnati was formed by officers of the Continental Army just before they disbanded in 1783. The society was named after the Roman Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, who twice left his farm to serve a term as Roman Consul and then served as Magister Populi, therefore assuming lawful dictatorial control of Rome to meet the emergencies of war. When the battle was won, he gave back his power and returned to his farm."



Ian Kahn, recapping General George Washington's farewell to his officers at Fraunces Tavern, shook the hands of spectators. When Washington said goodbye to his officers on Dec. 4, 1783, he asked each of them to come to him and take his hand.

The people who had fought so hard for eight years, who had suffered privation and in some cases imprisonment, the loss of all or most of their wealth and the death of their loved ones had not fought to create a monarchy. Though their realization of this vision was imperfect because of the existence of slavery, they had fought to create a country where everyone was created equal and "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights."

When George Washington walked out of Fraunces Tavern on Dec. 4, 1783 and rowed away, he became just another citizen. That was part of his greatness.

- Terese Loeb Kreuzer