

“M^r Monroe’s dying request”

by Bob Karachuk, Assistant Editor The Papers of James Monroe

James Monroe died in New York City at the home of his younger daughter and her husband, Maria and Samuel Gouverneur, on Monday, July 4, 1831, at half past three in the afternoon. Although Monroe experienced an “easy death,” his decline was long and slow and unremitting.

Nine-and-a-half months before his death, Monroe, in good if tender health, was dealt a blow that knocked him prostrate: On September 23, 1830, his wife, Elizabeth Monroe, died suddenly at Oak Hill, their plantation home in Loudoun County, Virginia. Monroe was left in such distress by the loss of his wife that Maria Gouverneur and her sister, Eliza Hay, considered it unwise for their father to continue living at Oak Hill. Monroe moved to New York to live with the Gouverneurs in October.

By the end of December, Monroe was too ill to leave his room. An incessant cough prevented him from resting properly. He grew weaker and weaker. John Quincy Adams, visiting Monroe in April 1831, observed that just speaking required an effort on Monroe’s part that exhausted him.

In May, Monroe made his will, dividing his estate equally between his two daughters.

Close family acquaintance Tench Ringgold attended him during the last two months of his life:

“I have been his constant attendant & nurse, since the first of May, with the exception of one week; during all May & part of June, he had chills & fever every day, they were however subdued early in June, but the disturbing cough, by which he has been tormented for many years, and which was the cause of his death was too obstinate & deeply seated on his lungs to be removed by human skill. On Friday the 1st of July it became evident that speedy dissolution was at hand, and he died . . . at 1/2 past three O clock on Monday without a struggle and resigned to his fate in the most perfect possession of his mental faculties.”

Sometime during his final illness, Monroe made a “dying request” that remained unknown to historians and biographers until two documents were discovered in the collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania this past spring: He asked that one of his slaves be given his freedom.

The two documents—a recommendation of Peter Marks by Tench Ringgold, dated August 27, 1831, and a certification of Peter Marx’s status as a free person by Samuel L. Gouverneur, dated September 20, 1832—constitute the first and only known evidence of the manumission of a slave by James Monroe.

Washington August 27th 1831

The bearer hereof Peter Marks a coloured man late the property of James Monroe deceased, late President of the United States, has been liberated & set free by at M^r Monroes dying request by his executor Samuel L. Gouverneur of the City of New York & by Mr^s E K Hay one of M^r Monroes daughters to whom he was a slave.

Peter is honest, and capable, he is an excellent dining room serv[an]t, and a good coachman, has been brought [up in] the family of M^r Monroe from his infancy ea[rly l]ife & I can recommend him to any person [who ma]y want a waiter or coachman, as I have long [know]n him—

[Tenc]h Ringgold

I certify that Peter Marx, formerly belonging to James Monroe deceased, has been made free at the request of his late Master—

Washington Sept. 20. 1832

Sam^l L Gouverneur

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Sources: Harry Ammon, *James Monroe: The Quest for National Identity*, 568-72; Tench Ringgold to James Madison, 4 and 7 July 1831, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/99-02-02-2383> (Early Access) and <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/99-02-02-2387> (Early Access); Daniel Preston, "James Monroe and the Practicalities of Emancipation and Colonization," in *New Directions in the Study of African American Recolonization*, ed. Beverly C. Tomek and Matthew J. Hetrick, 130, 133, 135, 143; Tench Ringgold, Recommendation of Peter Marks, 27 August 1831, and Samuel L. Gouverneur, Certification of Peter Marx's status as a free person, 20 September 1832, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.