

# *Witness* TO REVOLUTION | The Unlikely Travels of Washington's Tent

## AUDIO TOUR »

### Ordering Tents 203

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In May 1776, George Washington purchased a set of tents from the most prominent upholsterer in Philadelphia, a man named Plunket Fleeson. Upholsterers like Fleeson and his fellow Philadelphian Elizabeth “Betsy” Ross usually made things like curtains and furniture covers. But they also saw the war as a business opportunity, and they turned their shops into production sites for things like flags and tents.

The original receipt for Fleeson’s work for Washington survives, though most of the products of that work do not. Fleeson made him a large marquee, or tent, for dining, and another sleeping and office marquee with an inner chamber — something like a tent within a tent — for private work and sleeping. Fleeson’s shop also produced a smaller baggage tent, leather valises for transporting goods, and folding stools for Washington. You can learn more about the valises and stools nearby, where one of each is displayed. Washington would have also travelled with many wagons’ worth of other baggage — clothing, paperwork food, furniture, cooking equipment, and so on — all managed by a household staff he called his military “family,” which included soldiers, enslaved people, paid servants, and staff officers. These people became intimately familiar with Washington’s tents as they transported them, set them up, and worked under their canvas.

But the war lasted longer than anyone expected, and by 1778, after his first tents had seen two hard years of active campaigning, Washington needed a new set of tents. He secured a new sleeping and office marquee — displayed upstairs here at the Museum — and a dining marquee, which today is in storage at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. While we know who made Washington’s first set of tents and how much they cost, the story of the second set of tents that survive isn’t as clear. They were probably made in Reading, Pennsylvania, just as the Continental Army was preparing to leave Valley Forge in May of 1778. Washington would use them for the rest of the war, and they would somehow survive right up to the present day.