

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

AUDIO TOUR »

Object Highlight: Martha Washington's Trunk 205

In front of you is a large, black leather trunk with small brass tacks arranged in decorative patterns. It was made by a Philadelphia craftsman for Martha Washington, and it travelled with her during the Revolutionary War.

Martha Dandridge Custis married George Washington in 1759, after the death of her first husband, Daniel Parke Custis. Each winter of the Revolutionary War, she visited the Continental Army and stayed with her husband. But did Martha Washington ever stay in the tent?

That's one of the many interesting questions that we can't answer for sure. Of course, George Washington's surviving camp bedstead is hardly big enough for him, and Martha's presence would have encouraged him to take up residence in a house rather than his tent. Indeed, in the winters when Martha was with him, George stayed in the houses of civilians living where his army was encamped. Either way, she would have been familiar with the tents and many of the objects displayed here.

In early 1778, for example, Martha Washington arrived at Valley Forge, where the General was living in a crowded stone house and trying to hold the Continental Army together. With a military escort and relatively few personal belongings, perhaps including this very trunk, she had traveled from Mount Vernon to spend the winter with her husband. Like all the Continental Army's encampments, Valley Forge was not just a place for soldiers. Women were just as familiar with life on campaign, and hundreds of laundresses, nurses, officers' wives, and local civilians followed the army throughout the war. At Valley Forge, Martha Washington helped manage a household, hosted dinners, and heard petitions from civilians seeking George Washington's help. In June of 1778, she returned home around the same time that her husband acquired a new set of tents and set out on yet another campaign.