

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

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Washington's Military "Family" 206

Washington relied on a lot of people to conduct his wartime affairs. He appointed young officers with, in his words, "talents and abilities of the first rate" as his aides-de-camp, or military assistants. They included men like Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens, whom Washington considered part of his military "family." This entourage also included a company of soldiers called the Commander in Chief's Guard, or Life Guard, whose duties included guarding Washington's camp and baggage. These men were selected from regiments throughout the Army and needed to be between 5'8" and 5'10" tall, ensuring that they would look very uniform when standing in line. They wore blue coats and bear-fur crests in their hats to distinguish them from other soldiers. This contingent was often supplemented by additional men, as in August 1782 when thirty soldiers from the 1st Connecticut Regiment were assigned to "pitch General Washington's Marquee." Dozens of other people, including both enslaved and free cooks, laundresses, and wagoners, completed the military family that made Washington's headquarters function.

You might be tempted to think that Washington's staff and Guard were an elite group, like today's secret service. But the rare diary of one of the Guards, Elijah Fisher, displayed nearby, and other military records document the same sorts of problems faced by other units – drunkenness, gambling, and even the robbery of a civilian's house by poorly-disguised Guardsmen. Early in the Revolutionary War, authorities even discovered an assassination plot against Washington led by a British deserter serving in the Guard.

In later years, old veterans recalled serving in Washington's Guard or on short-term assignments, watching as important dignitaries met with him in the tent and as he worked late into the night.