

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

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No one, aside from Washington himself, spent more time under the tents than William Lee, who was born enslaved in Virginia and purchased by Washington in 1768. When Washington left for war, he took Lee with him as his personal servant. Lee probably slept in the end of the tent where military manuals suggested baggage would be stored and servants could live. Portraits of Washington during and after the war, like those shown nearby, frequently included men of African descent, sometimes in exotic clothing. Though these figures were often artistic tropes, their presence prompts us to wonder about all the other people who surrounded Washington during the war.

We don't know what William Lee thought about the Revolution and its ideals. While we know that Washington and Lee spent many years together under canvas during the war, we do not know a single actual sentence that passed between them. We can only imagine what these two men, profoundly separated in many ways, might have talked about.

We do know that during the war, William Lee worked and lived in a small wartime community of free and enslaved people of African descent. He married a free woman named Margaret Thomas, who worked as a laundress for Washington during the Revolutionary War. In 1783, Lee returned to Mount Vernon and Thomas went to Philadelphia to find work. Though Lee asked Washington to arrange for her to come to Mount Vernon, it is unclear if she ever made it there to reunite with Lee.

Lee spent the rest of his life at Mount Vernon, including after Washington freed him in his will in 1799. After a series of disabling accidents, he worked as a shoemaker on the plantation. In the next generation, as we'll learn shortly, Lee's nephew, Philip, would help transport Washington's tent on a new stage of its journey.