

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

AUDIO TOUR »

Among His Troops 209

In 2017, our curators discovered an amazing, misidentified painting for sale at an auction house in Texas. After we purchased it, staff were able to confirm that it showed a Continental Army encampment at Verplanck's Point, New York, on the Hudson River, early in the fall of 1782. Pierre Charles L'Enfant, a French officer serving in the Revolutionary Army, painted it, but it had become separated from his other papers, which included another related watercolor now at the Library of Congress.

What makes this watercolor especially exciting is what L'Enfant painted atop a small hill on the far left. It is George Washington's sleeping and office marquee, decorated with an elaborate wooden bower that provided shade. Many people wrote about Washington's tent during the war, but this is the only eyewitness depiction of what it looked like when in use.

1782, the year of this scene, was a tense time for the American Revolutionaries. While he had defeated a large British force at Yorktown the year before, Washington fully expected that he would have to recapture New York City next. To do so, he would need the ongoing support of the French forces, even as those allies began to turn their attention to other theaters of their war with Britain. Washington staged practice amphibious operations on the Hudson and had his soldiers erect an elaborate, mile-long encampment to impress visiting French officers. You can learn more about this watercolor in Stop 210 nearby.

Washington used his tent as a key part of this display, ensuring that it was visible on the high ground and that everyone knew he was remaining in the field, with his soldiers, committed to the war, to the bitter end.