

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

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Becoming Relics 211

There were few precedents for what George Washington should do in 1783, after the signing of the Treaty of Paris. Revolutions can easily topple into disaster and dictatorships. What would happen next?

He surprised many people when he handed power back to the people by surrendering his military commission and returned to Mount Vernon. And he did so again when he decided not to run for a third term as President of the United States in 1796. By the time of his death in 1799, he was the single most famous and revered American, at home and abroad.

Because of the complicated nature of the Washingtons' estate when Martha died in 1802, family members inherited only a few items, including fine furniture, ceramics, and silver, as well as 150 enslaved men, women, and children. Other items from Mount Vernon were put up for auction according to Martha Washington's will and sold to the highest bidder to help fund the education of three of her orphaned nephews. Bidders included family members who competed to purchase family heirlooms.

Soon enough, people began to venerate anything even remotely associated with Washington, including people, places, and objects. Encountering these objects became a way for some Americans to have a lasting physical connection to Washington and the Revolutionary generation. But in 1802, his tents were hardly more than the necessary tools of war. When Mount Vernon's contents were sold, they were listed among the estate's farm equipment. The buyer, George Washington Parke Custis, Martha Washington's grandson, would ensure that the tents, so symbolic in war, would now become symbols of the nation's revolutionary experience.