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

AUDIO TOUR

George Washington Parke Custis 212

Few people capitalized on the legacy of George Washington more than George Washington Parke Custis. He was Martha Washington's grandson whom George Washington had raised like a son at Mount Vernon and in presidential homes. Custis saw himself as the inheritor of the Washington legacy and felt responsible for ensuring ongoing reverence for his step-grandfather. He gave speeches, wrote essays, and encouraged a new generation of American historians to write about Washington and the family relics. It's thanks to Custis's writings and efforts that Washington's tents — unlike every other tent used in the Revolutionary War — survived to become treasured museum objects.

Custis purchased Washington's tents at the Mount Vernon estate sale after his grandmother's death in 1802. When not using them to entertain guests at Arlington, the estate he inherited, he sent them on the road as a travelling exhibition. William Lee's nephew, an enslaved man named Philip Lee, was often in charge of transporting the tents and ensuring their safe display as they travelled to events and festivals in New York, Pittsburgh, Richmond, and Baltimore. Philip Lee had to somehow balance such responsibilities — including overseeing white laborers in different cities — with the violent realities of slavery and racial prejudice. In 1829, for example, he appealed for help in northern newspapers to raise $1,000 to prevent his wife and seven children (who were enslaved at different plantations) from being sold to a new owner in Georgia. His appeal succeeded, though he remained enslaved. Four years later, in 1833, Lee found himself overseeing the transport of Washington's dining tent to an event Fredericksburg, Virginia, on a ship bearing the president, Andrew Jackson.

The nation was changing. Custis hoped that a rising generation of Americans (who had never met or seen George Washington) would be inspired by the tents as tangible witnesses to the founding of the United States. But the United States meant different things to George Washington Parke Custis and to Philip Lee. It would take a Civil War to truly grapple with the momentous question that Washington's generation had failed to answer: did the words "all men are created equal" apply to all people?