

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

AUDIO TOUR »

Witness to War 215

George Washington Parke Custis, George Washington's step grandson, died in 1857, as arguments over slavery dominated national politics. His daughter, Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee, along with her husband, a respected U.S. Army officer named Robert E. Lee, inherited Arlington House. This inheritance included the enslaved people who worked and lived on the estate, and Washington's tents.

In 1861, when Virginia seceded from the Union and joined the newly formed Confederacy, Robert E. Lee resigned his commission and went on to command the Army of Northern Virginia. The Lee family left most of their belongings — including the Washington relics — as they fled farther south. United States troops occupied the estate grounds and began plundering mementoes from the house. One soldier drew the sketch displayed nearby of his comfortably furnished bedroom in Arlington House, entitling it "This Cruel War! — Roughing it at Arlington House." In 1864, the United States designated part of the property as a federal military cemetery, which discouraged the Lees' return when the war ended. It remains a national cemetery to this day.

Although the Lee family had fled, their enslaved people remained at Arlington throughout 1861 and 1862. Selina Gray, Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee's enslaved housekeeper, held the keys to Arlington's attic. When United States troops began plundering the house, she alerted their commander, General Irvin McDowell, who helped orchestrate the removal of the relics to a safer location, in Washington, D.C. You can learn more about Selina Gray in the tour stop nearby.

The Washington relics were placed on display in a wartime exhibit in the U.S. Patent Office. Today, that building is the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery and American Art Museum. Alongside reports from the warfront, newspapers printed reviews of the show, what one reporter called "the only purely authentic souvenirs of the greatest man in modern times."