

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

## AUDIO TOUR »

### National Treasure 217

---

In the decades surrounding the 100th birthday of the United States in 1876, more Americans saw Washington's tents than ever before. The famous American illustrator Howard Pyle, for example, saw Washington's tents at the 1876 Centennial International Exhibition here in Philadelphia and he integrated the tent into his 1897 painting, *In the Presence of Washington*.

Washington's tents and camp equipment were also part of the beginning of America's national collection of historical artifacts. After the Centennial, they were among the first historical objects acquired by the new Smithsonian Institution, which had previously been dedicated primarily to natural history, displaying things like gemstones and fossils. When the Smithsonian National Museum opened in 1881, some of Washington's objects went on display, although the tents — too large to exhibit — were moved into storage.

But at the same time that 10 million people were visiting the Centennial celebration and in the years that followed, Americans were debating the meaning and ownership of Washington's tents and relics. Were they the public property of the nation? Or did they belong to the people who had owned them at the outbreak of the Civil War, the descendants of Martha Washington who were now more affiliated with their famous father, the rebel Confederate General Robert E. Lee?