

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

## AUDIO TOUR »

### Centennial 218

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Congress selected Philadelphia to host America's first world's fair for the 100th birthday of the United States in 1876. 285 buildings were erected in Fairmount Park, northwest of the city, at a cost of more than \$11 million (the equivalent of \$316 million today). People thronged to Philadelphia to see the Exhibition. Inside the Government Building, they could admire one of Washington's marquees, set up to shelter a display of his uniform, sword, and camp chest. "There is certainly no exhibit in the entire exposition," wrote one reporter, "which is so calculated to rouse our feelings of national pride and thrill our hearts with memories of the days of '76 as is this one."

But what did the memory of 1776 mean in 1876? This was a time of change and divisiveness as the country grappled with the legacy of the Civil War. Millions of people visited the Centennial Exhibition and saw Washington's tent on display there, but the fair's organizers promoted an exclusive definition of Americanness, excluding African American visitors from certain buildings and barring women from displaying works in the art exhibit. The Centennial displays cemented the patriotic symbolism of Washington's tents while also calling attention to the enduring presence of inequality in the nation.