

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

AUDIO TOUR »

Reclaiming the Relics 219

Even before the Civil War ended, the Lee family petitioned for the return of their Arlington estate and family belongings. They even secured the support of President Andrew Johnson before he was overruled by Congress in 1869. Congress believed that the objects were “the property of the Father of his country, and as such are the property of the whole people,” especially given that the alternative was returning them to the family of the Confederacy’s top general. Washington’s tents were at the center of a national debate about what kind of country the United States would be, who would be included in its governance, and what the Civil War had meant.

Mary Custis Lee, the eldest daughter of Mary and Robert E. Lee, was Martha Washington’s direct descendant, as her mother had been. With fierce determination and an appeal to another president, William McKinley, she managed to reclaim the relics in 1901. Lee didn’t want to preserve the tents herself, but instead spent the rest of her life ensuring that her family relics would end up in collections where they were accessible to the American people. In 1906, she announced that she would sell Washington’s sleeping and office marquee, hoping to raise money to support her favorite cause, a home for Confederate widows in Richmond, Virginia. As she said in one interview,

“There is no place at which I should rather see at least one of the tents than in Independence Hall in Philadelphia, beside the Liberty Bell and its other historic relics.”

Meanwhile, staff at the Smithsonian, where the tents were still stored, had to figure out how all the canvas pieces they had fit together. They set up Washington’s tents on the National Mall and photographed them as seen in the images on the screen nearby. Where would Washington’s tent go next?