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

AUDIO TOUR ⟫

Purchasing Washington's Tent 221

The Museum of the American Revolution is a new museum, opened in 2017. Over a century ago, another new museum opened outside of Philadelphia, the Valley Forge Museum of American History. That institution, which generations later would evolve into this Museum, was the creation of an Episcopal priest, Reverend W. Herbert Burk. This was long before Valley Forge was a National Park, and Burk hoped that he could inspire a new generation of Americans to remember the sacrifices made during the Revolutionary War by building a museum and an Episcopal cathedral on the grounds of the war's most famous winter encampment.

But Burk needed artifacts if he was going to open a museum. And in 1906, an amazing opportunity presented itself: Mary Custis Lee put George Washington's tent up for sale. The sleeping and office marquee would cost $5,000. By 1909, primarily through small donations, Burk had raised enough for a deposit and retrieved the tent from the Smithsonian. He immediately set his tent up at Valley Forge for a photo op in the snow, as seen in an image displayed nearby, and subsequently in a display in his museum. But Burk soon realized that there had been some mistakes in the sale. Though he was never able to correct the error, we know that he ended up with the exterior of Washington's sleeping and office marquee and the tent poles from Washington's dining marquee and that the inner chamber of the sleeping and office marquee remained at the Smithsonian. Years later, Washington descendants would sell that portion to the National Park Service, which today displays it at Yorktown, Virginia.

This exhibition is the first time that so many other objects related to the tents have been reassembled in one museum. Because it is not possible today to see all of Washington's tents in one place, we have created some engaging resources, including a travelling program and a virtual interactive based on replicas, to help you imagine how all the pieces of this puzzle once fit together.