

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

AUDIO TOUR »

Still Bearing Witness 222

Since the Museum of the American Revolution opened in 2017, over one million people have seen Washington's sleeping and office marquee on display upstairs. But before we opened, the tent presented a variety of challenges. It's huge, so where could we display it? It's fragile, so how would we set it up when it originally had many ropes pulling the fabric in all directions? It's light sensitive, so how would we make sure that people could view it without damaging it under intense lighting?

The first phase of this work required a professional conservator. Virginia J. Whelan spent over 500 hours stabilizing the tent. We didn't want to repair old damage, as even small tears and holes could tell us about how people had used the tent over the years. We continue to find small pieces of the tent, cut away centuries ago as personal souvenirs, that we can match to existing holes. But we did need to ensure that the tent was stable enough for display, and this involved filling some holes with custom-printed fabric, sewn on carefully to avoid any new damage to the tent. Meanwhile, we worked with structural engineers who created an elaborate support structure, something like two large patio umbrellas, that support the tent and make it appear as if the ropes are placing it under tension. We even created a full-size replica tent, part of our First Oval Office Project that you'll learn about here, as a stunt double to test this structure and star in the movie upstairs.

Have you been to the second floor of this building to see Washington's tent? Filmmakers and historians collaborated to tell its story — the story you have travelled through here — in a very quick twelve-and-a-half-minute film! Whether you've seen it a dozen times or are just about to watch it for the first time, this exhibition will help you appreciate it even more.