

The First Oval Office: George Washington's Tents and the Museum of the American Revolution

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I am going to take you on a journey through the creation of a museum, and how we ended up displaying the Islamic charm that Dr. Jonathan Burns, Professor of Archaeology at Juniata College, discovered at Fort Shirley. The Museum of the American Revolution is located at Third and Chestnut Streets in Philadelphia, just two blocks from Independence Hall, where the old National Park Service visitor's center for the Bicentennial once stood. It's a great location to tell the story of the American Revolution. More than five million people visit this neighborhood every year, wandering around the streets and sites that played such a critical role in the founding of the nation. The museum, which opened on April 19, 2017, provides an engaging, immersive introduction to the history and ongoing legacies of the American Revolution. Together with the National Constitution Center, the Museum of the American Revolution establishes Philadelphia's historic district as a cultural destination of international significance. I like to think of the Museum of the American Revolution as the Old Testament, the Constitution Center is the New Testament, and Independence Hall and the surrounding historic sites as the Rock on the Mount, where it all happened.

The story of the Museum of the American Revolution starts in a building right across the street from where the Museum now stands. A newspaper called *The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* was printed there. On August 15, 1906, *The Evening Bulletin* carried the headline "Sacred Relics to Aid Charity: General Robert E. Lee's Daughter Will Sell Two Tents Owned by Washington."¹ I will go back to the eighteenth century now, but I want you to keep that headline in mind as we go along.

It's 1775. Down the block on Chestnut Street sits the Pennsylvania State House: what we now know as Independence Hall. It was here, in mid-June 1775, that the Second Continental Congress appointed George Washington as Commander-in-Chief of the United Provinces, as the future United States were then called. After the battles of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, provincial troops had encircled Boston, trapping the British forces there. These troops were essentially a New England

* This text expands on the original presentation by referencing events that have occurred since November 2016.

army, and Congress decided to adopt them, raising additional troops from the other colonies to create a Continental Army. Washington, as a Virginian, was an excellent choice to solidify support from the middle and southern colonies. Washington set out for Boston immediately after his appointment and arrived at headquarters in Cambridge on July 2, 1775.

On his way through New York, Washington received an interesting address from the New York Provincial Congress. British Royal authority had collapsed, so New York created its own shadow government. The New York Provincial Congress wrote to Washington to congratulate him, and they essentially gave him the keys to the city as he rode through. They also reminded him that, once the matter with Great Britain was settled, they expected that Washington would not make himself a king or Caesar, but would return to his civilian occupation. Washington thanked them and reminded them, “When we assumed the Soldier, we did not lay aside the Citizen”² This was an early expression of what would become a bedrock American political tradition of civilian control of the military.

None of the New Englanders knew who Washington was or how to recognize him. Because of this, one of the first things that Washington did as Commander-in-Chief was create a system of distinguishing marks for the uniforms of officers, including himself. The blue silk ribbon that Washington wore early in the war to mark himself as Commander-in-Chief is the only remaining piece of Washington’s uniform that has survived from the Revolution. It was recently rediscovered by the museum’s Chief Historian at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard and was displayed during our opening year alongside Charles Willson Peale’s 1776 portrait of Washington.

By the winter of 1775, it was clear that the fighting that began at Lexington and Concord would not be resolved quickly. The British were intractable, and there would be at least one more campaign season. Washington sent his aide, Colonel Joseph Reed, to Philadelphia in December of 1775 to meet with Congress, carry his dispatches, and help Washington prepare to take the field in the coming year. Washington wrote to Reed in March 1776, “I cannot take the field without equipage, and after I have once got into a tent, I shall not soon quit it.”³ I love this phrase because Washington was as good as his word: he remained in the field, tented, for eight years after he took command of the Continental Army. Until Vietnam, this would be the longest, most-protracted military conflict in American history. Washington returned home to Mount Vernon just once, for only a few days after the 1781 siege of Yorktown. At the time that he wrote those words to Colonel Reed in March of 1776, he probably didn’t know what he was signing up for.

While Joseph Reed was in Philadelphia preparing Washington’s equipage, he visited a shop owned by Plunkett Fleeson. Before the war, Fleeson sold draperies, curtains, and upholstered furniture. As the war began, he started making drums, flags, and other military materials to outfit American forces. Reed purchased from Fleeson a large dining marquee with a double front, and another large marquee with

a chamber tent. In the eighteenth century, a marquee refers to a type of large, oval-shaped tent, with a door at one end or on the side, like the one mentioned in the Plunkett Fleeson receipt. This receipt tells us that Washington had two tents, one for dining and the other for use as a sleeping and office space.

In 1776, the Continental Army stayed in the field much later than they normally would have. An army generally went into winter quarters sometime around September or October. It became difficult to depend on horses and oxen around this time because the grasses died down and the roads were hard to traverse. In 1776, however, the fighting lasted through the end of the year and into January 1777.

What does that mean for the story of Washington's tents? If linen, or indeed any fabric, gets wet and does not dry out, it begins to rot and fall apart. In 1777, the army again stayed late in the field until they marched into Valley Forge on December 19, 1777. Washington reportedly remained in his tent until the troops were under huts. After two years of hard use, Washington's tents essentially disintegrated and a second set had to be made. That second set of tents survives to the present day.

Beginning in 1777, this idea of Washington as a general who stayed in the field with his troops was starting to elicit commentary from men in his own army. On May 31, 1777, General George Weedon wrote to his friend John Page, "His excellency our good Old General, has also spread his Tent, and lives amongst us."⁴ Washington's men saw him as the glue that was holding the army together. His general orders two days before marching into Valley Forge stated: "He himself will share in the hardship, and partake of every inconvenience."⁵ Actions like these moved John Laurens, an aide-de-camp, to refer to Washington as "our truly republican general."⁶ Washington was inventing the model for what a general in a republic would be.

By the middle of the war, this idea of Washington as a republican general had spread across the Atlantic. A French mezzotint of 1780 depicted Washington in front of his marquee, holding copies of the Declaration of Independence and the Treaty of Alliance with France. Its Latin motto translates: "General Washington. He Does Not Threaten the Republic." European philosophes, particularly in France, were fascinated by the nation that was being formed from its primitive state and the idea that a republic could be created and actually survive.

Also in this portrait of Washington is an image of William Lee, his enslaved valet. Lee is the only slave owned by Washington who was immediately freed upon the general's death. He was known as a skilled horseman and lived in the tent with Washington throughout the war. The image of Washington, Lee, and the marquee became a familiar trope in period artwork.

In the summer of 1782, a French officer observed that rather than taking a house as his headquarters, Washington "decided to set an example to his soldiers by living in camp."⁷ Washington was so adored that even foreigners saw him as this extraordinary man who deserved admiration and respect.

Washington took that one final act, to follow the example of Cincinnatus, the Roman statesman who stepped up to save the republic and then returned his sword and went back to his plow. He returned his commission to Congress in December 1783 and returned to Mount Vernon on Christmas Eve. The marquee tent, the rest of his camp equipage, and his military papers, which he carefully preserved, came back to Mount Vernon with him. He paid a great deal of attention to making sure these items were preserved.

One of Martha Washington's two grandchildren by her first marriage, whom the couple adopted and raised at Mount Vernon, takes the story to the next generation. When Martha died in 1802, George Washington Parke Custis, or "Wash" as he was known, inherited a great deal of the Custis wealth, including enslaved people, landholdings, and money. He built a spacious home called Arlington near the new federal city of Washington D.C. This became a showplace for his connection to his illustrious adopted grandfather, George Washington, and natural grandmother Martha. Beginning in about 1806, Custis began an annual tradition of erecting Washington's tents at Arlington. As a Federalist who advocated American economic independence, Custis offered an annual prize for improvements in breeds of American sheep as a way of encouraging agricultural advancements. He used these contests as an opportunity to give orations about George Washington and his visions for the republic. Early on, newspapers reprinted his entire speeches.

Shortly after the War of 1812, George Washington Parke Custis's agricultural contests ended and the tents were put away. They were brought back out when the Marquis de Lafayette came to visit the United States in 1824 and 1825. Washington's tent and the Star-Spangled Banner were displayed at Fort McHenry when Lafayette arrived by steamboat. Surviving Revolutionary War officers and the last living signer of the Declaration of Independence, Charles Carroll of Maryland, greeted Lafayette upon his arrival.

By the 1840s, the condition of the Washington tents had become quite fragile and they were in danger of being reduced to small scraps of fabric. George Washington Parke Custis had begun cutting up the linen and presenting it to people as relics. Today, there are six or seven pieces of the tents that have ended up in the collections of different historical societies.

In 1831, George Washington Parke Custis's daughter, Mary Anna Randolph Custis, married the future Confederate general Robert E. Lee. By the time the American Civil War took place, the Washington relics resided at Lee's home, Arlington House. When the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter, the Union Army took control of Arlington. They did not want the Confederate Army to occupy such a strategic position so close to Washington, D.C.

When the Lee family fled Arlington, they took some of the more portable Washington relics with them, like the silver and portraits. However, there were a lot of items that couldn't be moved in time.

These items, including Washington's field equipment, were left in the care of Selina Gray, an enslaved woman owned by the Custis-Lee family. She was entrusted with the care of the house. When she learned that Union soldiers were pilfering the Washington relics, she appealed to the commander and turned the keys to the house over to him. Recognizing the political and historical importance of the Washington relics, Federal officials moved many of the remaining objects into the city, claiming the mantle of Washington for the Union cause.

The objects were taken to what was then the Patent Office in Washington, D.C. and placed on display there. They got caught up in the politics of the Reconstruction period when, in 1866, there was a newspaper announcement saying that they would be returned to Robert E. Lee, despite the fact that the items belonged to his wife, Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee. Congress was upset at the idea that these items would be returned to the Confederate general. By 1888, the Washington relics had been transferred to the National Museum, the Smithsonian. It wasn't until 1901, during the McKinley administration, that these items were returned to the Lee family.

It wasn't in Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee's lifetime that they were returned, but rather that of her daughter, Mary Custis Lee. She was the daughter referred to in *The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* advertisement mentioned at the beginning of my talk. A remarkable woman, she never married after the war and instead travelled the world. Until just a few years ago, a bank vault in Alexandria, Virginia, contained several steamer trunks full of her letters and mementos. Those are now in the collection of the Virginia Historical Society. Through these and other sources, historian Hannah Boettcher has recently explored how Mary Custis Lee consciously chose to place various Washington relics at different institutions to preserve the memory of the Washington family. She hoped that a least one of the tents would be displayed in Independence Hall, already recognized as a pilgrimage site for connecting to the founding era.⁹

By offering to sell Washington's tents, Mary Custis Lee hoped to raise \$10,000 to support a home for the widows of Confederate soldiers in Richmond, Virginia. In 1914, her offer came to the attention of an episcopal priest in Norristown, Pennsylvania, the Reverend W. Herbert Burk. Burk had embarked on an ambitious scheme to build the Washington Memorial Chapel at Valley Forge, and to found a museum of American history alongside it. Mary Custis Lee's offer was one of his first opportunities to acquire a major relic of American history.

In the process of acquiring the tents, Burk used many of the techniques we recognize today in non-profit fundraising. He wrote individual letters of appeal, saying things like, "Dr. Burns, you are a patriotic American. Surely you can give one dollar to help preserve this object so that future generations can learn about the struggles and sacrifices of General Washington." These letters are now part of the collection at the Museum of the American Revolution.

In the end, Burk put \$500 down on the purchase of Washington's sleeping/office tent. Because the tent was so large, he had to build a custom case for it. Unfortunately, the only part of the tent that was visible to guests was the roof. Reverend Burk started selling tickets to view the tent at fifteen cents each, later raising the cost to twenty-five cents. In this way, he slowly raised money to pay off the rest of the loan. He even sold souvenir postcards.

Reverend Herbert Burk's purchase of that tent in 1914 was the beginning of the collection that became the Museum of the American Revolution. One could say that the Museum was built around Washington's marquee. The tent is now displayed in a new custom case, large enough for guests to see the tent fully set up. But how do you display a 240-year-old tent made from fragile canvas while also making it look realistic?

Eighteenth-century marquee tents were all set up using tension. The only rigid structure consisted of two upright poles and a ridgepole. The fabric part of the tent was stretched out using ropes and wooden pins to pull it into shape. Through consultation with structural engineers and textile conservators, the Museum of the American Revolution designed a unique structure, not unlike an umbrella, that is placed underneath the marquee. This structure, along with a "subtent" to protect the artifact from contact damage, supports the marquee without placing stress from tension on it.

Visitors to the Museum of the American Revolution can view the tent as part of a multi-media program entitled "Washington's War Tent." Retractable screens have been installed in front of the case that allow the Museum to tell the story of Washington's marquee while also limiting damage to the tent caused by prolonged exposure to light. The screens lift during the multi-media show to reveal the tent to guests, then lower once again to block out harmful UV rays. This ensures that General Washington's marquee tent will continue to inspire new generations for years to come.

A lot of times you go to history museums and the exhibit is static: a teacup on a shelf, the date it was made, the name of the creator. Science museums do a better job of engaging visitors by asking them questions and showing them evidence. The Museum of the American Revolution has adopted this approach in the hope that asking visitors questions will help them get more involved. The Museum's exhibits are framed around four main questions: How did people become Revolutionaries? How did the Revolution survive its darkest hour? How revolutionary was the war? What kind of nation did the Revolution create?

The Museum also uses immersive environments to engage guests. These include a full-size recreation of a Liberty Tree (incorporating a real piece of wood from the last standing Liberty Tree), the Long Gallery at Independence Hall where American prisoners were held during the British occupation of Philadelphia, and a privateer ship visitors can actually board. Through these immersive environments, visitors encounter the stories of real people who lived during the Revolution.

One such individual is James Forten, a free African-American boy who saw Washington's army march down Chestnut Street on its way to Yorktown. Forten saw black and white men marching together in the New England regiments. He later wrote about this experience and the pride he felt when he became a fierce abolitionist. He even joined a privateer ship, which was later captured. When offered a chance to avoid a prison ship if he joined the British Navy, Forten chose imprisonment over conscription. He survived and returned to Philadelphia. Upon his death, 10,000 Philadelphians marched in his funeral procession. This way of exploring history, through the places it happened and the people who were there, encourages people to make a direct connection with the past and to think more critically about it.

In order to vary the pace of the overall experience, other galleries at the Museum of the American Revolution are more artifact-based. These artifacts are used to tell unfamiliar stories, like that of the war in the South. Although recent scholarship has reclaimed some of that story, the popular memory of the Revolution often does not include the South. A small brand, preserved in the Drayton family of South Carolina, is used to examine the complicated ideas of liberty and slavery in occupied Charleston during the Revolution. Engraved with "I. Drayton," this brand was used to mark human property. Because it was coated in silver, it was considered humane. Silver was thought to be a cleaner metal that allowed enslaved people to heal more quickly after being marked in this horrific manner.



Figure 2: Muslim charm recovered from Dr. Jonathan Burns's archaeological dig at Fort Shirley, near Shirleysburg, Pennsylvania. Photo credit: Sean Miller

The Museum also tells new stories about new things, such as the small Islamic charm unearthed by Dr. Burns at Fort Shirley. The charm bears the inscription, “There is no God but Allah.” The Museum uses this object to talk about the foundations of what modern Americans consider to be a core value, the freedom of religion. The case where the Muslim charm is displayed also houses emblematic objects from different faith communities across colonial America. There is an English communion flagon used by Methodist pioneer George Whitefield. There is a weather vane from the first Lutheran church in Trappe, Pennsylvania. There are a pair of Torah scroll finials made by Myer Myers, a Jewish silversmith in New York before, during, and after the American Revolution. These finials are interesting because, for every other pair of scroll ends in America that have survived, the finials at the top are crowns. The crowns on these finials have been removed, possibly as a form of protest against the monarchy in 1776.

Then we have the Muslim charm. There is growing scholarship looking at the presence of Islam among enslaved Africans. So little was brought from Africa when enslaved people crossed the Atlantic. The display of the charm is particularly meaningful in the city of Philadelphia, where there is a large African-American Muslim community, as well as a growing immigrant population. The museum is excited to have a representation of a faith that is in the news a lot these days.

NOTES

1. “Sacred Relics to Aid Charity,” *The Evening Bulletin* – Philadelphia, Wednesday, August 15, 1906.
2. John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, vol. 3, *Jan. 1770-Sept. 1775* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1931), p. 305.
3. John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, vol. 4, *Oct. 1775-April 1776* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1931), p. 368.
4. Harry M. Ward, *Duty Honor, or Country: General George Weedon and the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1979), p. 89.
5. “General Orders, 17 December 1777,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 29, 2017, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-12-02-0566>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 12, *26 October 1777–25 December 1777*, ed. Frank E. Grizzard, Jr. and David R. Hoth. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002, pp. 620–621.]
6. John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 15 Dec. 1777, *The Army Correspondence of Colonel John Laurens in the Years 1777-8* (New York: The Bradford Club, 1867), p. 93.
7. Verger Journal, 22 Sept. 1782 in Howard C. Rice, Jr., and Anne S. K. Brown, transl., eds., *The American Campaigns of Rochambeau's Army 1780, 1781, 1782, 1783*, Volume I (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press and Brown University Press, 1972), p. 167.
8. George Washington to Continental Army, “Farewell Orders,” 2 Nov. 1783, *The American Revolution, 1763-1783*, Library of Congress. <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/amrev/peace/farewell.html> (accessed September 1, 2017).
9. Hannah Boettcher, “Mary Custis Lee Unpacks the Washington Relics: A Revolutionary Inheritance in Museums, 1901-1918” (M.A. Thesis, University of Delaware, 2016).