

Washington's Tents

During the American Revolutionary War, George Washington relied on a series of campaign tents—known as marquees—that functioned as his mobile headquarters as he led the Continental Army. Far from simple shelter, the tents became the operational center of his command, earning a reputation among historians as a kind of “first Oval Office.”

Washington used the marquees to plan military strategy, write official dispatches, and meet with fellow officers and allies as the war unfolded. By living and working in tents alongside his soldiers rather than occupying grand homes, he reinforced an image of republican leadership rooted in humility and shared sacrifice.

Washington typically traveled with a complex of three main tents, each serving a distinct purpose. The most notable was his sleeping and office marquee, the best-preserved example of the group. The oval-shaped tent measured approximately 14 by 23 feet, offering about 300 square feet of space, and stood 12 feet tall. Inside, linen partitions divided the interior into three areas: a private bedchamber, a central office and meeting space, and a rear section used for baggage and dressing by Washington's staff, including his enslaved manservant, William Lee.

A second tent, known as the dining marquee, was significantly larger and more open in design. Measuring roughly 28 by 16 feet, it was used for war councils and formal meals, accommodating gatherings of 40 to 50 people. The third structure, a smaller baggage or “horseman's” tent, was used for storing equipment and housing additional staff.

Together, the tents formed a functional command center that moved with the army, reflecting both the practical demands of wartime leadership and Washington's commitment to leading from the field rather than from a distant seat of power.

Washington's original sleeping and office tent from the Revolutionary War was carefully preserved by generations of the Custis and Lee families following the deaths of George and Martha Washington. In 1909, Reverend W. Herbert Burk of Norristown, Pennsylvania, purchased the tent from Miss Mary Custis Lee, daughter of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Reverend Burk considered the tent the “supreme relic of Washington” and he made it the centerpiece of an American history museum he established at Valley Forge. Reverend Burk's Valley Forge Historical Society, the predecessor organization of the Museum of the American

Revolution, served as the longtime steward of Washington's tent.



Washington's “War Tent” is on display at the Museum of the American Revolution, Philadelphia, PA.