

Valley Forge History and Significance

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Pre-encampment

American Indians occupied the area in and around what is now known as Valley Forge NHP from circa 10,000-8,000 BP (before present) onward, enjoying the abundance of food and shelter offered by the river valley environment. The last native people to inhabit the area were the Lenape, known today as the Delaware. Europeans began to settle the region in the late 17th century and gradually displaced the natives. By the time of the encampment, most of the land in the vicinity had been cleared for agriculture, which was the primary occupation.

Within what is now the park, 18 landowners established fairly prosperous farms on the choice agricultural soils. Along Valley Creek, an iron works named Valley Forge was established, and a small industrial village including charcoal houses, a saw mill, grist mill, and company store grew up around it. The slopes of Mounts Joy and Misery were wooded and were frequently cut over to supply wood for charcoal-making to fuel the iron forge.

On arrival in December 1777, a Continental soldier would have seen an open, rolling landscape divided into many small crop fields and pastures by fences and hedgerows; woodlands and charcoal hearths on the mountains; and the smattering of structures in the Village of Valley Forge, including the ruins of the forges themselves-burned during a raid by the British three months earlier.

Encampment

The winter encampment at Valley Forge is one of the most famous episodes of the American Revolution. The significance of the encampment lies both in its fact-based history and also its storied myth. The mythical narrative is important in its own right for it reveals something about our character in the heroic way we wish the Revolution to be remembered. The popularity of the myth also speaks to its usefulness. Valley Forge remains a touchstone-always ready to minister to a generation in crisis.

The myth often obscures the actual history of the event, however. It tells us

that it was the experience of tremendous suffering from cold and starvation during the encampment that forged a spirit of preternatural patriotism among Washington's men. Hardship did occur at Valley Forge, but it was not a time of exceptional misery in the context of the situation. The encampment experience could be characterized as "suffering as usual," for privation was the Continental soldier's constant companion. Likewise, patriotism did not peak during the relatively short six-month period at Valley Forge. Widespread devotion to the cause was an early war phenomenon for the most part. Steadfast patriotism found a long-term home among only a few Americans, most notably the veterans who served for the duration.

To fully appreciate the significance of what occurred at Valley Forge, the event must be placed in context of the entire American Revolution. Few Americans appreciate the scope of the war. Many do not realize that the war lasted for eight-and-a-half- years, was international in scale, or that the American army campaigned in areas as far flung as Canada, Georgia, and west of the Alleghenies.

The Valley Forge encampment occurred during the third year of the war. Early successes against a smaller British army had led some Revolutionary leaders to believe that the righteousness of their cause and a militia-type force composed of citizen soldiers would be enough to force the British from America. By the time of Valley Forge, however, most Americans realized that the Revolution would be a long, drawn-out affair.

While some refused to accept it, the nature of the war changed in July 1776 when a large contingent of English and Hessian troops reached America's shores and sought to crush the rebellion. By the fall, the British had pushed Washington's unevenly trained and outnumbered force to the brink of defeat and established control over New York City and the states of New York and New Jersey. Only Washington's bold Christmas night 1776 crossing of the Delaware River and subsequent victories at Trenton and Princeton, New Jersey, saved the cause from disaster.

In order to put the army on firmer footing, the Continental Congress allowed George Washington to recruit soldiers for longer enlistments, beginning in 1777. The men of this establishment formed the bulk of the professional force that would fight the rest of the war. After wintering at their strong hold in

Morristown, New Jersey, Washington's forces prepared to meet the British with renewed fervor in the spring of 1777.

British strategy for the third year of the American Revolution included a plan to capture the patriot capital at Philadelphia. To accomplish this objective, the British Commander-in-Chief, Sir William Howe, set sail from New York City in July 1777 with nearly 17,000 of His Majesty's finest troops on board transport ships. The expeditionary force landed at the head of the Chesapeake Bay (now Elkton, Maryland). To oppose Howe, General Washington marched his 12,000-man army from New Jersey.

On the march south, Washington paraded the American army through Philadelphia to impress the various factions among the citizenry with the prowess of the patriot force. Though commonly conceived of today as a rag tag bunch of inexperienced fighters, by 1777, the Continental Army was battle-tested and capable of standing up to the British. While campaigning against superior numbers of professional soldiers, Washington's men fought hard and were often on the offensive. One observer of the march through the city that summer prophetically stated that

[The men] though indifferently dressed, held well burnished arms, and carried them like soldiers; and looked, in short, as if they might have faced an equal number with a reasonable prospect of success.

— Captain Alexander Graydon 24 August 1777

In the two key battles of the Philadelphia campaign, Brandywine and Germantown, the Americans fought with skill and courage. Though they lost both battles, as well as the capital at Philadelphia, the Continental Army emerged from these experiences with a confidence like that of an underdog sports team that had thrown a scare into the champion:

... [the experience of the battle of Germantown] has served to convince our people, that when they make an attack, they can confuse and Rout even the Flower of the British Army, with the greatest ease, and they are not that invincible Body of Men which many suppose them to be.

— George Washington to Major General Israel Putnam 9 October 1777

Yet work remained to be done. The army had difficulty executing complex large-scale maneuvers such as the orderly retreat. As a result, retreats could turn into panicked flights. Indeed, General Nathanael Greene believed that the troops had “fled from victory” at Germantown. As the campaign wound down through the months of November and December, Washington maintained strong offensive pressure on the British in the city.

With the British ensconced in Philadelphia, Washington and his general officers had to decide where to encamp for the winter. As he chose a site, Washington had to balance the congressional wish for a winter campaign to dislodge the British from the capital against the needs of his weary and poorly supplied army. By December 12, Washington made his decision to encamp at Valley Forge. From this location 18 miles northwest of Philadelphia, Washington was close enough to maintain pressure on the enemy dwelling in the captured patriot capital, yet far enough to prevent a surprise attack on his own troops. From here the Continental Army could protect the outlying parts of the state, with its wary citizens and precious military stores, as well as the Continental Congress—which had fled to York, Pennsylvania.

Washington and his campaign-weary men marched into camp on December 19, 1777. The soldiers, while not well supplied, were not downtrodden. They exuded the confidence of men who knew that they had come close to beating the British in battle. They were cautiously optimistic about the future and resigned themselves to the task of establishing their winter camp.

The romantic image that depicts the troops at Valley Forge as helpless and famished individuals at the mercy of winter’s fury and clothed in nothing but rags renders them and their commander a disservice. It would be difficult to imagine a scenario in which the leader of a popular revolution stood by while his men froze and starved. The winter of 1777-78 was not the worst winter experienced during the war, but constant freezing and thawing, and intermittent snowfall and rain, coupled with shortages of provisions, clothing, and shoes, made living conditions extremely difficult. Rather than wait for deliverance, the army procured supplies, built log cabins to stay in, constructed makeshift clothing and gear, and cooked subsistence meals of their own concoction.

Provisions were available during the early months of the encampment. For example, army records of the food shipped to camp in the month of January 1778 reveal that the men received an average daily ration of one-half pound of beef per man. The most serious food crisis occurred in February, when the men went without meat for several days at a stretch. Shortages of clothing did cause severe hardship for a number of men, but many soldiers had a full uniform. At the worst point in early March, the army listed 2,898 men as unfit for duty due to a lack of clothing. During this time, well-equipped units took the place of their poorly dressed comrades and patrolled, foraged, and defended the camp.

One of the most immediate remedies against the weather and a lack of clothing was the construction of log shelters by the men. Valley Forge was the first winter encampment where many thousands of men had to build their own huts. The officers formed the men into construction squads and instructed them to build cabins according to a 14-foot by 16-foot model. The army placed the 2,000-odd huts in parallel lines, and according to one officer, the camp “had the appearance of a little city” when viewed from a distance. Most agreed that their log accommodations were “tolerably comfortable.”

In addition to the huts, the men constructed miles of trenches, five earthen forts (redoubts), and a state-of-the-art bridge based on a Roman design over the Schuylkill River. The picture of the encampment that emerges from the army records and the soldiers’ own writing is that of a skilled and capable force in charge of its own destiny.

The Continental Army’s quick seizure and use of the land directly across the Schuylkill River offers an example of the extent of its capability. Once the bridge spanning the river was complete, the army made full use of the land north of the river as a vital supply link. The farms located on the north side provided forage for the Continental Army, the location of a camp market where farmers from this vicinity could sell their produce to the army, and the center for commissary operations. The bridge connection also made the camp more secure as patrols could range the country to the north and east to check British movements and intentions in that quarter.

Even though camp markets and the establishment of a center for commissary operations brought food and supplies into camp, the establishment of the

winter camp so close to the British caused the men additional hardship. Instead of being able to focus on building the camp and obtaining much needed rest, the troops had to expend energy on security operations. The men spent extra-long hours on duty patrolling, standing guard, and manning dangerous outposts near the city and the enemy. Washington recognized the strain that this situation placed on his men and rewarded them with two months' hardship pay.

Perhaps the most notable suffering that occurred at Valley Forge came from a factor that has not been frequently mentioned in textbooks: disease was the true scourge of the camp. Men from far flung geographical areas were exposed to sicknesses from which they had little immunity. During the encampment, nearly 2,000 men died of disease. Dedicated surgeons, nurses, a small pox inoculation program, and camp sanitation regulations limited the death tolls. The army kept monthly status reports that tracked the number of soldiers who had died or were too sick to perform their duties. These returns reveal that two-thirds of the men who perished died during the warmer months of March, April, and May, when supplies were more abundant. The most common killers were influenza, typhus, typhoid, and dysentery.

The army interred few, if any, of its soldiers who perished within the lines of the camp. Doctors dispatched the most serious cases to outlying hospitals, both to limit disease spread and also to cure those individuals who could be saved. The army buried the soldiers who died in these out-of-the-way care facilities in church graveyards adjacent to the hospitals. These scattered Southeastern Pennsylvania gravesites have never been systematically commemorated.

The scale of the Valley Forge encampment was impressive. The number of soldiers present ranged from 12,000 in December to nearly 20,000 in late spring as the army massed for the campaign season. The troops who came to camp included men from all 13 original colonies and regiments from all of them except South Carolina and Georgia. The encampment brought together men, women, and children of nearly all ages, from all walks of life, of every occupation, from different ethnic backgrounds, and of various religions. While most were of English descent, African, American Indian, Austrian, Dutch, French, Germanic, Irish, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Prussian, Scottish, Spanish, and Swedish persons also filled out the ranks. The women

present at Valley Forge included approximately 400 enlisted men's wives who followed the army year-round and a few general officers' wives who came on extended visits. Although most soldiers came from a Protestant background, Catholic and Jewish personnel also were among those in camp.

Civilians played a key role in the encampment. The local community was largely a Quaker one. Most of the nearby, prominent farm and industrial families were members of the Religious Society of Friends. These persons and their Scottish, Irish, and German neighbors assisted the army to varying extents as their sentiments ranged in degree from staunch patriot to fervent Tory. Distressed and haughty New England officers in camp leveled their most impassioned complaints at the locals who did not appear to support the cause. Whether or not these disaffected persons were Quakers or from some other religious affiliation, resolute patriots referred to them all as "Quakers," and persecuted some for not aiding the Continental Army. In spite of the resentment leveled at them, it was often the Quakers and other religious

societies such as the Bethlehem and Lititz Moravians and the Ephrata Cloister members who rendered valuable assistance to sick soldiers while many citizens stood aside. Within this civilian milieu, the army was able to stabilize its situation and concentrate on a much-needed training program.

Valley Forge was demographically, militarily, and politically an important crossroads in the Revolutionary War. Recent scholarship shows that a mix of motives was at play, particularly in the minds of men who enlisted in early 1777. Some of these men served out of patriotism, but many served for profit or individual liberty (as in the case of enslaved, indentured, and apprenticed peoples), and many more were coerced as most colonies, on the advice of Congress and pressure from General Washington, introduced conscription in 1777.

As well, the participants had different values, and especially different ideas about what words such as liberty, equality, slavery, and freedom actually meant in practice. Valley Forge provides a site for exploring this complicated story and examining the multiple perspectives of those involved there – from soldiers to citizens, officers to enslaved Americans, from women to American Indians – the encampment was a microcosm of a revolutionary society at war. Also important, the ideas and ideals held dear by Americans

today were not forged at Valley Forge, but rather contested – not just between patriots and the British – but also among different Americans. Valley Forge and the Revolution put the United States on a long road to defining those ideals in ways satisfactory to all – a process still in the making.

Despite the difficulties, there were a number of significant accomplishments and events during the encampment. Because of its far-reaching consequences, the single most noteworthy achievement was the maturation of the Continental Army into a professional force under the tutelage of Friedrich Wilhelm Baron von Steuben. Baron von Steuben assessed the army and recognized that Washington's men needed more training and discipline. At the same time he realized that American soldiers would not submit to harsh European-style regulation.

Von Steuben did not try to introduce

the entire system of drill, evolutions, maneuvers, discipline, tactics, and Prussian formation into our Army. I should have been pelted had I attempted it, and should inevitably have failed. The genius of this nation is not in the least to be compared with that of the Prussians, Austrians, or French. You say to your soldier [in Europe], "Do this" and he doeth it; but [at Valley Forge] I am obliged to say, "This is the reason why you ought to do that," and then he does it.

— *Baron von Steuben to Baron de Gaudy, 1787-88*

Instead, von Steuben demonstrated to the men the positive results that would come from retraining. He provided hands-on lessons, and Washington's independent-minded combat veterans were willing to learn new military skills when they saw immediate results. Von Steuben remarked on how quickly Washington's men progressed in the retraining process, saying that it normally took two years to properly train a soldier. As spring wore on, whole brigades marched with newfound precision and crisply executed commands under the watchful eye of the baron.

Von Steuben's regulations extended beyond tactical instruction. The Inspector General also spelled out directives for officers and eventually wrote a complete military handbook. The army hereafter would be more cohesive,

healthier, and highly efficient. A new professionalism was born.

The Commander-in-Chief's professional reputation also got a boost at Valley Forge. Two events that occurred during the encampment strengthened George Washington's authority. The first was the emergence of a group of critics who denigrated General Washington's leadership ability. The proponents of this movement, which became known as the Conway Cabal, suggested that General Gates, the victorious leader at the Battle of Saratoga, was perhaps more fit for the top command position. This splinter group of officers and congressmen blamed Washington for having lost the capital to the British and argued that he put the war effort in jeopardy. As winter wore on, the so-called cabal dissolved, bringing disgrace to and ending the careers of several of its leaders. Washington's authority was strengthened, as loyal supporters rallied to defend and exalt the Commander-in-Chief.

A second event that consolidated Washington's control was his successful campaign to have a congressional committee visit camp. The general lobbied Congress to confer with him in person in order to resolve some of the supply and organizational difficulties that had plagued the army during the 1777 campaign. The committee emerged from the Valley Forge meeting with a better understanding of the logistical difficulties Washington faced and more sympathetic to the army's requirements. The army reorganization was one of the most far-reaching consequences of the committee's work. Almost from the war's outset, Washington had argued for a large professional army. The public's disdain for standing armies limited his ability to raise a sizeable force. The reorganization of 1778 represented a compromise between civilian and military ideals. Realizing that the army existed at only a portion of its authorized strength, Congress consolidated regiments and created a more streamlined force. European recognition augmented congressional reforms.

French assistance was crucial to the success of the Revolution. Starting in 1776, vital French aid in the form of military materiel flowed to America. The efforts of American agents in France and the strong performance of the continentals at the Battles of Saratoga and Germantown convinced the French to do more than provide covert aid. At Valley Forge in the spring of 1778, the army joyously celebrated the formal French recognition of the United States as a sovereign power and valuable alliance with this leading European nation. Though it would take years to bear fruit at Yorktown in 1781, the alliance

provided Washington with the formidable French naval assistance and additional troops he needed to counter British marine superiority.

In mid-June, Washington's spy network informed him that the British were about to abandon Philadelphia. The Commander-in-Chief rapidly set troops in motion: a small force marched in and took possession of the city. The majority of the army swiftly advanced from staging areas on the north side of the Schuylkill River and southeast of camp toward the Delaware River and New Jersey in order to bring on a general engagement. On June 28, at the Battle of Monmouth, New Jersey, Washington's men demonstrated their new battlefield skills, as they forced the British from the field. Monmouth hurt the British in the short term and provided the Americans with a long-term boost in confidence.

In the summer of 1778, Washington could claim that the war effort was going well. The army's decision to occupy Valley Forge and maintain strong offensive pressure on the enemy was a wise one. After they abandoned Philadelphia, the British had little to show for all of their past year's efforts. Thanks to the contributions of von Steuben and others, the Continental Army was more unified than ever before. The expected arrival of the French greatly altered British war plans. Philadelphia was back under patriot control. Washington knew that for every year the war dragged on the Americans held the advantage. The British withdrawal from Pennsylvania protracted the war and played into his plans.

The success of Valley Forge also can be measured in longer-term gains. Many regard Valley Forge as the birthplace of the American army. The concepts of basic training, the professionalization of the officer corps, and the rise of the army's distinctive branches, such as the corps of engineers, all got their start here. The military lessons that von Steuben helped instill served Washington's veterans well. The Continental Army forced the British to retreat at the battle of Monmouth, New Jersey, in June 1778, and fought with skill in the southern campaigns that led to the victory at Yorktown in 1781. The "relish for the trade of soldiering" that von Steuben inspired in the men also enabled the army, despite continuing hardships and spiraling citizen apathy, to stick single-mindedly to their task until they secured independence in 1783.

The symbolic importance that Americans have attached to Valley Forge since the 19th century both complicates and enriches its authentic history. The establishment of Valley Forge as a memorial provides a place where generations of Americans have had the opportunity to discover and admire the Continental Army's sacrifices and achievements and to participate in commemoration of this history. The desire to commemorate began to shape the history of this place soon after the army marched out.

Post-encampment

The scale and intensity of the encampment devastated the landscape of the Valley Forge area. By the time the army left in June 1778, every tree for miles around had been taken down for firewood or hut construction, as well as miles of farmers' fences and many outbuildings. The livestock and stores of the area's residents had been commandeered and consumed. The land itself was pockmarked with entrenchments, muddy military roads and paths, some 2,000 huts, offal and other refuse pits, and work areas.

Farmers quickly recovered, and within the decade the huts were largely gone; fields replanted; and woodlots re-sprouted. By the early 19th century, landowners on the north side, with its particularly exceptional agricultural soils, experimented with "scientific farming" to increase the yields of their fields, and became prosperous. On both sides of the river, farms were improved, farmhouses enlarged, and large barns and other outbuildings added, changing the scale of what had been modest farms at the time of the encampment.

At the Village of Valley Forge, a musket factory was established even before the revolution ended. In the 19th century, iron mills and later a steel mill were operated there, as well as textile factories; saw, paper, and grist mills; wharves and a towpath associated with the Schuylkill Navigation Canal; a rail line with freight and passenger stations; stone and sand quarries; a water bottling plant; and enterprises including a hotel, stores, blacksmiths, and a tannery. The thriving community included dwellings, religious institutions, and schools.

Source: Valley Forge National Historical Park General Management Plan, National Park Service, 2007. Public Domain.