



# MORRISTOWN

## Where America Survived

Narrated by  
Edward Herrmann

### TRANSCRIPT

Complete version shown at the Washington's Headquarters Museum,  
Morristown NHP, Morristown NJ

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#### *ACT ONE – DECEMBER 1779*

##### **Introduction**

Sounds of a gusty snowstorm grow  
Graphic over video:

*The period of the Revolution has repeatedly been styled  
"the times that tried men's souls."*

*I often found that those times not only tried men's souls,  
but their bodies too.*

*I know they did mine.*

Joseph Plumb Martin,  
Soldier at Morristown 1779-1780

Narrator:

A bitterly cold snowstorm howled in from the north as George Washington led his army into New Jersey, to the village of Morristown. It was the first of December, 1779, and already the fifth snowfall of the season.

Narrator:

The war against the British was now in its fourth year, and Washington's army had long been neglected by a weak, almost bankrupt Congress. Soldiers were not paid for long periods of time, and Continental currency was nearly worthless.

Food for the men was scarce. Their clothing was a disgrace.

Narrator:

As the army moved off the battlefield to establish their winter encampment, another struggle lay ahead. The worst winter in colonial times—*perhaps the worst in all recorded history*—would soon be upon them. The winter of 1780 would come to be known as “The Hard Winter.” It would be the ultimate test of whether the American Revolution could survive.

Music full swell

Graphic:

MORRISTOWN

WHERE AMERICA SURVIVED

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### Sad State of Troops / Joseph Plumb Martin

SFX: crunching of snow and numerous trudging footsteps

Graphic:

*December 1779*

Narrator:

The Continental army marched toward a dense woodland south of Morristown called Jockey Hollow. Colonial armies seldom fought in the winter, and winter encampments were essential to rest men and restock supplies.

Narrator:

Throughout December waves of soldiers converged on Jockey Hollow, some marching hundreds of miles. Four years of fighting and fleeing the more powerful British army had taken its toll.

Many of the troops were described as “nearly naked,” with clothing and shoes torn apart after months of fighting and marching through rugged landscapes. All of them were tired, freezing, and nearly-starving.

Narrator:

Among the soldiers was 19-year-old Joseph Plumb Martin of Connecticut. Martin's memoirs fifty years later would eventually give a voice to the enlisted man's experience in the American Revolution.

GRAPHIC of archival Title Page

*Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Dangers, and Sufferings*

*Of a Revolutionary Soldier*

*Written By Himself*

Joseph Plumb Martin:

The winter of 1779 and '80 was very severe; it has been denominated “the hard winter”, and hard it was to the army in particular, in more respects than one.

We arrived on our camping ground in late December and began to make plans to build us a city for habitation.

Sometimes we could procure an armful of straw to lie upon, which was deemed a luxury. Provisions, as usual, took up but a small part of our time, though much of our thoughts.

Narrator:

The plan at Jockey Hollow was to clear hillsides of trees to build an elaborate grid of log huts. Until the huts could be built, the only shelter would be tents, and ragged clothes.

### Geography: Jockey Hollow, Morristown

Narrator:

Morristown was not chosen by happenstance.

Earlier that November, Washington dispatched Gen. Nathanael Greene to find a good location for camp in northern New Jersey. With the British headquartered in New York, Washington wanted to be close enough to watch the enemy, but far enough away to be safe from a surprise attack.

Narrator:

The Watchung Mountains provided a 30-mile-long natural fortress, with only one gap, west of Springfield, midway between Morristown and Staten Island. The area's terrain included steep rises that were heavily wooded -- difficult for an invading army to travel through.

Jockey Hollow was to be transformed: 2,000 acres of trees were to be cleared for building huts and supplying firewood, and more than ten thousand men were expected to arrive.

Narrator:

Generals and staff stayed in private homes in and around Morristown. Washington set up headquarters at the Ford Mansion, home to Theodosia Ford, widow of patriot Colonel Jacob Ford.

The family moved into two rooms as Washington and his officers took over the rest of the house.

Morristown's largest home soon became a bustling center for military planning and communications.

### Morristown's population and militias

Narrator:

The small Presbyterian community generally favored the revolution, but by 1779 local support was waning.

Washington's army had wintered there three years earlier, after the victory at Princeton. With no time to build an encampment, three thousand soldiers were housed with families, and a deadly outbreak of smallpox swept through the civilian population.

Narrator:

Now the army was bringing over ten thousand men within walking distance to Morristown's roughly two hundred people. "There is a very different kind of inhabitant in the place," wrote Nathanael Greene. "They receive us with coldness, and provide for us with reluctance."

Narrator:

Revolutionary fervor was fading in towns around the Watchungs too. Early in the war, the militia had constructed a series of tall bonfire beacons as a warning system in case of attack. A lit beacon on a hillside was visible for miles and signaled other scouts to light theirs.

By 1780 the beacons had fallen into disrepair, and Washington requested they be rebuilt, with haste.

Narrator:

With little hope in the efforts of Congress, and grave doubts about the support of the people and the militia, Washington could only wonder what the winter months would bring.

Dip to black

## ACT TWO – WINTER 1780 The beginnings of a brutal winter

Music, sound effects of chilling winds

Graphic:

*Winter 1780*

Narrator:

No living person had ever seen the likes of that winter at Morristown. Heavy snow storms followed one after another. Roads were covered by deep snow. Temperatures seldom rose above freezing. For the only time in recorded weather history, all ports from the Carolinas northward were frozen over for more than a month.

Narrator:

Dr. James Thacher of Massachusetts, a young army surgeon at Morristown, described what he saw there.

Dr. James Thacher:

We experienced one of the most tremendous snowstorms ever remembered. No man could endure its violence many minutes without danger to his life.

Some of the soldiers were actually covered while in their tents and buried like sheep in the snow.

The soldiers are so enfeebled from hunger and cold as to be almost unable to perform their military duty or labor in constructing their huts.

### Building the Log Hut City

Narrator:

Between storms, soldiers rushed to clear the trees and cut the wood for their shelter.

Joseph Plumb Martin and his fellow soldiers were eager to get out of their tents.

Joseph Plumb Martin:

The soldiers would always endeavor to provide themselves with such tools as were necessary for the business. If you should chance to make a shrewd Yankee guess on how they did procure them, remember: they were in distress, and you know when a man is in that condition he will not be over scrupulous how he obtains relief, so he does obtain it.

Narrator:

Each regiment would stake out a high hill, clear it, and build a carefully-structured pattern of huts. Building on the downhill slopes would provide better drainage to keep the soldier huts dry, avoiding encampment mistakes of the past. At Valley Forge two years earlier, huts constructed in low-lying areas were susceptible to flooding, creating poor hygiene conditions that led to a wave of deadly diseases.

Narrator:

The log hut encampment was a planned city. Each hut had to be *exactly* 16 feet long and 14 feet wide. Huts had to be exactly the same distance apart. It was an exercise in discipline; any hut not meeting exact specifications was to be torn down and rebuilt.

Narrator:

Eventually, about one thousand completed huts ranged across the landscape in what a visiting Connecticut schoolmaster called a "Log House City," with huts "exceedingly neat, ... and placed in more exact order than Philadelphia." The winter encampment became the new nation's fifth largest "city" in population.

### Signs of disparity

Narrator:

Each soldier hut would be home to twelve men. Bunks rose against three sides. A stone hearth was built on the fourth wall. Soldiers depended on their fires for light, cooking, and whatever warmth they could muster before the next patrol duty outdoors.

Narrator:

Once the soldier huts were finished, men began building larger officer huts just uphill. The number of officers in each hut ranged between one and four, according to rank. Rank had everything to do with one's expectations of camp life. Generals staying in homes lived a life that included fine drink and food, and an occasional dance. Officers in log huts would have some means to entertain as well, with food to share with fellow officers, even when rations in camp were low. While not unusual in the military tradition of the time, this disparity would become wider as conditions in the Log Hut City worsened.

### Washington and the war: Lafayette / No supplies, starvation

Narrator:

At the Ford Mansion, Washington wrote letters pleading to Congress for more money. He warned them about how the suffering of the men and the threat of rising desertion made the army vulnerable to a British attack. He seldom received anything he requested.

Narrator:

Washington also waited for news from his young French ally, the Marquis de Lafayette. Nearly a year had passed since Lafayette returned to Paris to lobby for French reinforcements, and there was still no word.

Narrator:

Meanwhile, snowstorms continued to seal off the camp. Nathanael Greene wrote to a friend that "... all the wild beasts of the field and the birds of the Air have perished with the cold." Jockey Hollow was under siege. Winter had become the enemy.

Narrator:

James Thacher watched the men sink toward starvation, knowing nothing could be done.

Dr. James Thacher:

The snow is now from four to six feet deep, which obstructs the roads as to prevent our receiving a full supply of provisions. We are frequently for six or eight days entirely destitute of meat, and then as long without bread.

Narrator:

The soldier's primary mission became one of survival. Some soldiers began stealing food from farms. Washington and his officers wavered between enforcing discipline and turning a blind eye, and tensions in the area grew worse. Washington wrote Lafayette: "This is worse than anything -- at any time -- during the war."

Narrator:

Joseph Plumb Martin watched men go from stealing, ... to more desperate measures.

Joseph Plumb Martin:

The deep snow was the keystone in the arch of starvation. We were absolutely, literally starved. For four days and as many nights I did not put a single morsel into my mouth except a little black birch bark I gnawed off a limb. Some boiled and ate their shoes. Some officers killed a pet dog for food. If this was not starving, I wonder what was.

## The soldier's life / Enduring the winter

Narrator:

The harsh winter limited drilling, but soldiers continued patrols out to the perimeter of camp, no matter what the conditions. Others beat paths between camp and Morristown headquarters a few miles away.

Dr. James Thacher:

The sufferings of the poor soldiers can scarcely be described. They are badly clad and destitute of shoes. While on duty they are unavoidably exposed to all the inclemency of storms and severe cold.

Narrator:

Each day dragged on in boring, fatiguing fashion, with men muttering angrily and going to bed mumbling thoughts of desertion. As the winter drew on, the army was fast disappearing. Many left when terms expired. Others deserted, leaving their huts and fleeing into the night.

Narrator:

Despite the life-threatening conditions and lack of food, the winter's death toll was low compared to past encampments like Valley Forge.

Camp hygiene was improved, huts were constructed better, and many of the men were now veterans used to the harsh life. That so few succumbed under such brutal conditions stands as a testament to the improvements in wintering troops made at Jockey Hollow.

Narrator:

There were over 24 snowfalls before the dreadful winter ended. Washington wrote "... the oldest people now living in this country do not remember so hard a Winter as the one now emerging from."

About two-thirds of the army had disappeared. The soldiers who stayed could only hope that with the coming spring their patience would be rewarded, and their basic needs restored.

Dip to black

### *ACT THREE – SPRING 1780*

#### *Will there be change? / Congress committee / Lafayette's return*

Music combined with natural spring sound effects, emphasis on changing landscape

Graphic:

*Spring 1780*

Narrator:

In Spring the landscape around Jockey Hollow changed completely. The mood of desperation did not. Conditions in camp were little better than they had been through the long winter.

Dr. James Thacher:

Our poor soldiers are reduced to the very verge of famine; ... and their spirits are almost broken. It is with extreme pain that we perceive in the ranks of the soldiers a sensible diminution of that enthusiastic patriotism by which they were formerly distinguished.

Narrator:

With the spring thaw came the more demanding schedule of drilling, and the increasing likelihood of a powerful British attack.

Joseph Plumb Martin:

The monster, Hunger, still attended us. Here was the army starved and naked, and there -- their country sitting still and expecting the army to do notable things while fainting from sheer starvation.

Narrator:

Washington wrote letter after letter to Congress begging for the resources to keep what was left of his army together. In Philadelphia, many in Congress had grown tired of Washington's letters and dismissed them as exaggerations. In April their response was to send a three-man committee to Jockey Hollow to debunk Washington's claims. When the committee arrived and witnessed the poor conditions and low morale, one of the Congressmen raced back to Philadelphia with news that the situation was far worse than anything Washington had written.

Narrator:

That May, another important visitor arrived in Morristown. Lafayette returned to personally deliver electrifying news: a fleet of French warships and 5,000 soldiers would be on the way.

"The Court of France has made a glorious effort for our deliverance," Washington wrote. "This is a decisive moment; one of the most important America has seen."

## Near Collapse: Near mutiny

Narrator:

News of French assistance failed to rally spirits in camp. Nothing seemed to dim the fact that these soldiers were hungry, broke and tired of empty promises. Mutiny was in the warm May air.

Joseph Plumb Martin:

The men were now exasperated beyond endurance. They saw no alternative but to starve to death, or break up the army, give all up and go home.

Narrator:

On the twenty-fifth, men in Joseph Plumb Martin's Connecticut regiment turned rebellious, growling, "like sore-headed dogs."

Joseph Plumb Martin:

The men snapped at officers and acted contrary to their orders. Men refused to return to their quarters. The adjutant called one of the men "a mutinous rascal."

Narrator:

A highly-respected officer, Colonel Walter Stewart, attempted to intervene.

Joseph Plumb Martin:

Stewart told us, "You Connecticut troops have won immortal honor the winter past by your perseverance, patience and bravery,... and now you are shaking it off."

We told him... that the times, instead of mending, were growing worse. We had borne as long as human nature could endure, and to bear longer we considered folly.

Narrator:

The men returned to their huts of their own accord, and eventually some food and supplies followed. Mutinous feelings were soothed, but not eliminated.

## Battles of Springfield: Unity at the right time

Narrator:

Word of the sad state of the army at Morristown had reached the enemy. On June 6, British and Hessian troops crossed into New Jersey after nightfall. A regiment stationed near Elizabethtown upset the surprise, slowing the enemy's advance by wounding the commanding officer with a shot.

Narrator:

Militia scouts immediately set the first beacon in flames. Within minutes the hills were ablaze with warnings.

Washington's misgivings about the Jersey militia were proved wrong. By daylight militia units raced to join the Continentals.

Together they repelled the enemy's advance, and the swift invasion through the gap ground to a halt. By the end of the day the British retreated east to Elizabethtown.

Narrator:

Two weeks later the British pushed forward as far as Springfield. The army was joined again by militia men invigorated with spirit by the attack on their towns.

When a small force tried to pass through the gap, the Americans turned them back once more.

This second Battle of Springfield lasted only a day, and ended with a surprising retreat, as the British hastened back to New York.

Narrator:

The attack could have put Washington and his already weakened army in jeopardy of capture. The combined efforts of soldiers and militia men had prevented it.

Washington would write that "the behavior of the militia has been such as to do them signal credit, and entitled them to the warmest approbation."

Narrator:

Springfield would be the last major battle in the northern states. The army could now leave Jockey Hollow and press on with the war. They had truly survived the winter of 1780.

## Reprise: reflecting on the soldier

Reprise images of the brutal winter

Narrator:

Men with seemingly little to gain from the ordeal stayed and survived through Morristown's epic winter. They waited months for a piece of clothing to replace the rags they wore, or for their overdue pay in an almost worthless currency.

And they endured agonizingly long spells without food.

Narrator:

How could men such as Joseph Plumb Martin find the will to continue?

For many it was the sense of brotherhood, strengthened by marching together in the deep snow, or supporting one another during woeful times.

And there were those who stayed because they believed in the cause. No one reasoned why better than Martin:

Joseph Plumb Martin:

We were unwilling to desert the cause of our country when in distress.

We knew her cause was our own.

Music swells and concludes.