**“The Hard Winter”**

When soldiers arrived five miles west of Morristown they were unaware of how hard the winter was to become. Many contemporaries recalled it was the worst in their memory. Thomas Jones, Justice of the Supreme Court of the Province of New Work recounted in his book *History of New York During The Revolutionary War*: “The winter of 1779 was the severest ever known in the middle colonies. It may not be amiss to take some notice of it. The snow began to fall about the 10th of November, and continued almost every day till the middle of the ensuing March. In the woods it lay at least four feet upon a level.”

**The following selected documents provide a variety of accounts of the weather during the encampment.**

**Document # 1**

Sir Henry Clinton, New York City

“While the campaign was carrying on in South Carolina, the northern colonies had experienced the hardest winter ever known in that country. The port of New York having been shut up by the frost within a few days after we sailed from thence, all communication with that city by water was, toward the middle of January, entirely cut off, and several new ones opened over the ice, which had soon acquired so firm a consistence that the heaviest cannon could be dragged thereon across the North River to Paulus Hook. And large detachments of cavalry actually marched, and loads of provisions were transported in sleighs, to Staten Island – the first [Paulus Hook] two thousand yards and the last [Staten Island] eleven miles distant from that city.”

from *The American Rebellion: Sir Henry Clinton’s Narrative of his Campaigns, 1775-1783*, with an Appendix of Original Documents, Edited by William B. Wilcox, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1954

**Document #2**

Ensign John Barr, NY Brigade, Rockaway Bridge / December 2, 1779

“5th snow Hailed, snowed, rained and the wind blowing very hard which caused a violent storm, had orders to march to the place of our winter quarters.”

**Document #3**

Dr. James Thacher, Surgeon, Jackson’s Mass., Regt. / December 14, 1779

“… reached this wilderness, about three miles from Morristown, where we are to build log-huts for winter-quarters. Our baggage is left in the rear, for want of wagons to transport it. The snow on the ground is about two feet deep, and the weather extremely cold; the soldiers are destitute of both tents and blankets, and some of them are actually barefooted and almost naked. Our only defence against the inclemency of the weather, consists of brush-wood thrown together. Our lodging the last night was on the frozen ground.

Those officers who have the privilege of a horse, can always have a blanket at hand. Having removed the snow, we wrapped ourselves in great-coats, spread our blankets on the ground, and lay down by the side of each other five or six together, with large fires at our feet, leaving orders with the waiters to keep it well supplied with fuel during the night. We could procure neither shelter nor forage for our horses, and the poor animals were tied to trees in the woods for twenty-four hours without food, except the bark which they peeled from the trees. Lieutenant W. and myself rode to Morristown, where we dined, and fed our starving horses at a tavern. General Washington has taken his head-quarters at Morristown... Our baggage has at length arrived, the men find it very difficult to pitch their tents on the frozen ground, and notwithstanding large fires, we can scarcely keep from freezing. In addition to other sufferings, the whole army has been for seven or eight days entirely destitute of the staff of life; our only food is miserable fresh beef, without bread, salt or vegetables.”

**Document #4**

Calvin Green, son of Rev. Jacob Green, of Hanover / January 1780

“This is a hard winter, the hardest winter we have had in many years. The snow was so deep that we could ride on the banks over the tops of fences with horses and sleighs. In some places the ice was so hard and thick some people went over to Staten Island with horses and sled.”

**Document #5**

Joseph Plumb Martin, Connecticut solider, Morristown / January 2 – 4, 1780

“At one time it snowed the greater part of four days successively, and there fell nearly as many feet deep of snow, and here was the keystone of the arch of starvation. We were absolutely, literally starved. I do solemnly declare that I did not put a single morsel of victuals into my mouth for four days and as many nights, except a little black birch bark which I gnawed off a stick of wood, if that can be called victuals. I saw several of the men roast their old shoes and eat them, and I was afterwards informed by one of the officers’ waiters, that some of the officers killed and ate a favorite little dog that belonged to one of them. If this was not “suffering” I request to be informed what can pass under that name. If “suffering” like this did not “try men’s souls,” I confess that I do not know what could. The fourth day, just at dark, we obtained a half pound of lean fresh beef and a gill of wheat for each man;… When the wheat was so swelled by boiling as to be beyond the danger of swelling in the stomach, it was deposited there without ceremony. After this, we sometimes got a little beef, but no bread. We, however, once in a while got a little rice, but as to flour or bread, I do not recollect that I saw a morsel of either (I mean wheaten) during the winter, all the bread kind we had was Indian meal.

We continued here, starving and freezing, until I think, sometime in the month of February…”

**Document #6**

Dr. James Thacher, Stark’s Brigade, Morristown / January 3, 1780

“The weather for several days has been remarkably cold and stormy. On the 3d instant, we experienced one of the most tremendous snow-storms ever remembered; no man could endure its violence many minutes without danger of his life. Several marquees were torn asunder and blown down over officers heads in the night, and some of the soldiers were actually covered while in their tents, and buried like sheep under snow. My comrades and myself were roused from sleep by the calls of some officers for assistance; their marquee had blown down, and they were almost smothered in the storm, before they could reach our marquee, only a few yards, and their blankets and baggage were nearly buried in the snow.”

**Document #7**

Hugh Gaine, Loyalist, New York City / January 9, 1780

“Extreme cold and the rivers very full of ice. Deserters come in by half dozens.”

**Document #8**

Major John Patten, Delaware Regt. to Caesar Rodney / January 17, 1780

“…for as the snow is Exceedingly deep in this Country and the Roads well beat, it affords a happy means of conveying supplies on sleds. Which makes ample recompence for the stoppage of our Rivers… This is a cold mountainous Country and little supplies of any kind to be had in the neighbourhood of the Camp, which makes our situation less agreeable than that of Middle Brook last winter.”

**Document #9**

Johann Dohla, New York City / January 30, 1780

“Throughout the previous month it was constantly raw and cold. The North and East rivers were frozen solid. The ice was checked and found to be eighteen feet thick. All ships were frozen in, and it was possible to cross over the North River on foot, riding, or driving, without fear. “

**Document #10**

Major General Johann De Kalb from undated letter, taken from *Life of John Kalb by Friedrich Kapp*, c. 1870 / February 1780

“It is so cold, that the ink freezes in my pen, while I am sitting close by the fire. The roads are piled with snow until, at some places, they are elevated twelve feet above their ordinary level. The present winter is especially remarkable for its uninterrupted and unvarying cold. The ice in the rivers is six feet thick. Since this part of America has been settled by Europeans, the North River at New York, where it is a mile and a half wide near its mouth, and subject to the ebb and flow of a strong tide, has not been frozen over so fast as to be passable by wagons. Unfortunately our camp will suffer even more from the thaw than from the frost, for it is but too much exposed to inundation. Those who have only been in Valley Forge and Middlebrook during the last two winters, but have not tasted the cruelties of this one, know not what it is to suffer.”

**Document #11**

Major General Greene to Governor William Greene of Rhode Island / February 10, 1780

“We have had the most terrible winter here that ever I knew. Almost all the wild beasts of the field, and the birds of the Air, have perished with the cold. All the Bays, Rivers, and Creeks are froze up. Nature has given us a fine bridge of communication with the Enemy, but we are too weak to take advantage of it.”

**Document #12**

Moore Furman to Major General Greene / February 24, 1780

“…the [Delaware] River is now impassable so that in a few days there will not be a Barrel of Provisions here to forward.”

**Document #13**

George Washington, Morristown / March 16, 1780

“Ground was frozen again. About Sunrise it began to Snow… continued without intermission the whole day – at the same time cold. Snow abt. 9 inches deep.”

**Document #14**

George Washington, Morristown / April 1, 1780

“The Snow which fell yesterday & last night was about 9 or 10 Inches deep upon a level.”

**Questions:**

1. What kind of concerns/problems could the severe weather cause Washington’s Army?
2. What affects could the weather have on the morale of the men and the local inhabitants?
3. What did some resort to in order to survive this “hard winter”?
4. Based on the selected documents, do you think that the statement “hard winter” is appropriate? Explain.

**“The Hard Winter”**

Introduction:

This resource provides students with primary documents pertaining to the Winter Encampment of the Continental Army at Jockey Hollow during the period of 1779-1780. Relevant passages from key correspondences and general orders provide students with insight into the weather conditions experienced by soldiers while being encamped in Jockey Hollow.

Background:

The Winter Encampment of 1779-1780 was like no other winter experience during that time or any other time since. Over 20 storms from late November through April had passed through the region. The last few days of the old year and well into the first week of the New Year, the region was hit with three “Nor’ Easters” that resulted in snow drifts from four to six feet high. In New haven they recorded 42-48 inches of snow had fallen from these three storms never mind the drifting snow that would soon follow. Washington himself noted in his weather journal noted the following observance: “The snow which in general is eighteen inches deep is much drifted- roads impassable.” This was soon followed with what has been “rated as the most persistently cold calendar month in the history of eastern United States.”(p.114 Lum) This deep freeze gripped the better part of January with sunrise air temperature recordings at Hartford Connecticut from as high as 26 F on January 11th 1780 to as low as -22 F on January 29th 1780. Thomas Jefferson had noted the that the York River near Williamsburg Virginia froze completely making it pasaable by foot or horse. The waterways of New York had from time to time frozen over but not to the degree or length or for that matter the depth that this region had ever experienced. Sleighs traveled from Staten Island to Manhattan Island and across the Narrow to Brooklyn. At one point it was witnessed heavy cannon being taken across the ice. There is no doubt that this winter had left a lasting impression on all who survived.

Students will be able to:

* Perceive past events and issues as they were experienced by people at the time, to develop historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness.
* Understand the significance of the past to their own lives, both public and private, and to their society.
* Explain the problems, concerns and conditions faced by the inhabitants and the army during the winter of 1779-1780.