

Varnum's Quarters



It is winter, the last of the harvest is safely stored, and on your farm in the country all is well. But all is not well in your state. Your new country is at war, your army is losing, and your capital, Philadelphia, has been captured by the enemy. The news is not heartening, nor is the next piece of information you hear, the Continental Army is marching for Valley Forge, your home, to set up camp for the winter. The British have already taken many of your supplies. Are the American soldiers going to take the rest? Will your house be confiscated in the process? Will your farm be destroyed? What are you going to do?

The Stephens family must have asked these questions as the army marched onto their 150 acre farm. The family lived in this stone farmhouse built in a style reminiscent of Welsh architecture; with four rooms and an attic. On the upper floor would have been sleeping chambers and the lower floor the kitchen and parlor. It was here that David Stephens and his wife Elizabeth raised three children Eleanor, Maurice, and Abijah. By the time of the encampment the two older children were out of the house. David and his son Abijah would have worked the land and tended to the cows, pigs, and sheep; while Elizabeth did the cooking (an all day activity), cleaning, and laundry.

Brigadier General James Mitchell Varnum arrived with his staff in December 1777. This arrival dramatically altered life in the Stephens house. Suddenly the three family members were sharing their home with seven strangers. Varnum did not confiscate the Stephens farmhouse but offered to rent the property, the Stephens accepted. Varnum's office was highly active during the encampment acting as the site for many war councils along with general daily activity. As a result the Stephens family would have had additional military personnel regularly passing through their home.

Varnum's business was extensive and far ranging that winter. As one of the most outspoken officers, this Rhode Island general, tirelessly worked to improve the conditions of soldiers in camp, exchanging rawhides (from the cows, slaughtered to feed the soldiers) to get shoes for the soldiers. He often served as Brigadier General of the day for the main army. One of his biggest accomplishments that winter was a plan to combine the two pre-existing Rhode Island regiments and send the remaining troops home to recruit American Indians and African Americans (who, if enslaved would receive their freedom and their owners some compensation), to form a new regiment. The plan worked well, and the troops served with distinction. His greatest disappointment at this time was being denied leave to return home to see his wife and settle financial affairs.



Courtesy of Independence NHP

Kitchen



VAFO 1902 Table; VAFO 3419 Bucket Bench

During the Encampment the kitchen facilities were shared by the Stephens Family and Varnum's staff. It was busiest room in the house, used for cooking, eating, and as a workroom (especially in winter). At least ten people including the Stephens family and the military staff would have dined in the kitchen.

Located in the kitchen are what appear to be two tables. The table in the center of the room is walnut and poplar. The design features two drawers and a three-plank top which is secured to the turned legs by wooden pegs. Only the brass pulls on the drawers are reproductions. This table would have functioned as both a work surface while Elizabeth Stephens was preparing meals and as a dining table. The second table is actually a dough trough used in food preparation and the making of bread. The top of the trough was removed and the box below used to mix the ingredients for bread and to store the dough while it rises. The dough was kneaded on the top which also doubled as another work surface.



VAFO 3591 Dough Trough

Among the several pieces of furniture located in the kitchen at Varnum's are two used for storage. The china hutch and the bucket bench or water bench. Both of these pieces are made of pine, the hutch having iron hinges and locks. The bucket bench would have been used for storing wash water and milk from the Stephen family cows. The very top shelf may have contained basins for washing and shaving.



VAFO 3414 China Hutch

The Stephens family would have had a variety of dishware. Their best pieces for serving tea and coffee would most likely be creamware an English import resembling finer eastern porcelain. More utilitarian pieces such as breadpans and dishes that Elizabeth Stephens would have used were made of redware, a German-American style of pottery made from local clay. The military officers would have added tinware, such as tin cups and pewter to the mix. This tinware was extremely useful on campaign because it withstood abuse.



VAFO 2541 Breadpan; VAFO 30098-30194 Creamware; VAFO 2544 Plate; VAFO 30090 Tin Cup



VAFO 3417 Candlestick; VAFO 3418 Candle Mold

No electricity meant that light had to be provided by other means at night. One of the important sources of light was candles. Candles were made either from beeswax (an expensive ingredient) or tallow (which has an unpleasant odor). Though not an everyday task households would have to make candles either by dipping or using a candle mold. Homemade tallow candles could be very soft so they required a special candlestick that would support the candle. As it burned the candle would be raised up by a screw mechanism.

Hearth



VAFO 1910 Fireplace Tongs; VAFO 30105b Poker; VAFO 30106 and 2592 Fireplace Shovels; VAFO 1913 and 30117-30121 S-hooks; VAFO 30113, 30114, 30109 Pots; VAFO 30068 and 30112 Posnet; VAFO 1908 Broiler; VAFO 1909 Frying Pan; VAFO 30115 Dutch Oven; VAFO 1920 and 30110 Flesh Forks; VAFO 30111 Ladle; VAFO 1923 Peel, VAFO 1962 Striker

The hearth provided a place for Elizabeth to cook meals and a way to heat her home. Hearth cooking required control of the fire's intensity and the placement of hot embers to create burners. A skilled cook was able to ensure properly cooked food while preventing the spread of fire. Devices were used to control the fire including fireplace tongs, a poker, and fireplace shovels.

To cook over the fire Elizabeth Stephens would have used the crane. The crane is the large wrought iron arm that swings out from the wall, and could support multiple pots. By moving the crane she would have been able to retrieve pots without burning herself. Pots could be hung from the crane by either S-hooks or trammels which controlled how much heat a pot received. S-hooks, known for their distinctive 'S' shape, come in a wide range of sizes and doubled as a means to pick up and move pots. In the kitchen at Varnum's there are three pots. Pots and kettles could weigh from 20 to 40 pounds, empty, the crane was essential for easy movement once food was added greatly increasing their weight.

Other items used in cooking but not hung from the crane include: a posnet or saucepan, a broiler or gridiron used for cooking meat, the frying pan and the Dutch oven which was used for roasting or baking. Utensils that were used in the cooking process included the flesh fork used to turn meat and the ladle used for stirring and serving. To retrieve baked goods from the oven in the back of the hearth Elizabeth Stephens would have used a peel, made of iron, as this one is, or wood. A peel has a long handle and is used to place baked goods in the oven and remove them when baked. The most useful item to have in or near the hearth are steel or striker; a 'C' shaped piece of iron used with flint to spark a fire.

The Stephens Family Bedroom



VAFO 3518 Trundle Bed; VAFO 2590 Bed; VAFO 1905 Chest of Drawers

Though used as a bedroom during the encampment, this room would have served as the parlor under ordinary circumstances. The Stephens family may have aided the American cause by renting their home to General Varnum and his staff, but they like many of their neighbors retained the right to live alongside the officers. This not only provided them shelter but allowed them to keep watch over their home and farm.

The parlor was too small to comfortably fit two full-sized beds and still perform all the needed daily chores of running a farm. The Stephens might have used a solution, well known in the 18th century, in order to have their son with them. The solution comes in the form of a trundle bed. No different than a regular bed, a trundle bed is just lower to the ground and can be slid under the full size bed. At night it could be pulled out for use by Abijah while David and Elizabeth Stephens would have shared the regular bed. Both of the beds are painted red, a common feature in colonial wood furniture to diminish disparity between different wood types. Woolen blankets, perhaps from the family's sheep, and linen sheets, made from their flax crop, would have kept them warm during the winter season.

This commode armchair would have been a welcome addition to any home. Made by William Cox, a Philadelphia chairmaker, it is not the one the Stephens owned but is very similar. Commode chairs served a dual purpose. During the day the chair functioned just like any other armchair but at night the seat could be removed and a chamber pot placed underneath. It was not indoor plumbing but it was far more pleasant than running out to the privy on a cold winter night.



VAFO 1621 Commode Chair

Farm life continued even with seven soldiers in the house. Everyday chores such as laundry and textile production would have had to be completed, just in a more confined space. It is unlikely that Elizabeth Stephens would have had any concentrated time to spin wool from the farm's sheep or flax into linen with more people in the house. But linen and wool production assisted the family income and could not be ignored.



VAFO 2560 Hatchel; VAFO 2658 Carding Combs; VAFO 3319 Loom

These basic tools might have helped her. She would have pulled flax across the hatchel to separate the fibers from the plant casing. Elizabeth would have combed wool and created 'rolags' (rolls of wool) for spinning using the carding combs. She then would have used a spinning wheel to create wool yarn or linen thread for her own use or for sale. She may have woven tape on a simple loom. Always needed, tape was used for tying things on or shut.

Officers Bedroom



The small bedroom on the second floor is believed to have been used by the staff officers who accompanied General Varnum. This including a brigade adjutant, a quartermaster officer, and a commissary officer. Varnum's three aides-de-camp used the attic as their sleeping quarters.



VAFO 2557 and 91279 Folding Field Cots

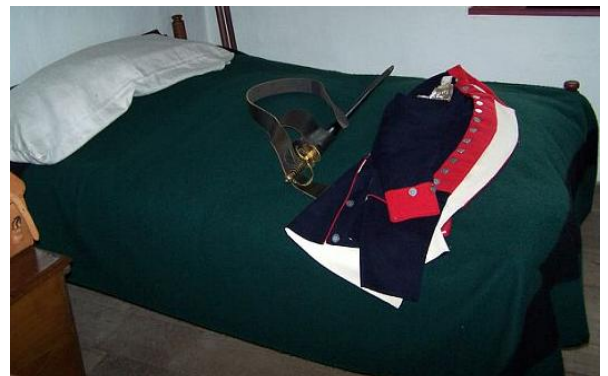
The officers staying at the Stephens house would have brought their own camp beds or folding field cots. These beds when folded take up little room and are easy to transport, but when open are a normal sized canopied bed. Used by officers, they provided some of the comforts of home. This officer left his black cocked hat with white cockade, symbolizing the French-American Alliance, on top of his bed.



VAFO 1924 Blanket Chest; VAFO 1229, 1933 and 2628 Portmanteau

Storage came in many forms and from many places. The Stephens family had a wood blanket chest used for storing extra linens in the small bedrooms, while the soldiers had to use more portable storage. The officers carried portmanteaus to hold their clothes and other necessities. These leather suitcases were lightweight and easy to transport either in baggage carts or by horseback.

Some officers may have used furniture already in the Stephens home. This bed is a low-post bed made of maple and poplar, like the beds on the first floor it has been painted red. Draped across the bed is the officer's regimental coat, sword, and belt.



VAFO 1903 Bed; VAFO 44191 Coat

General Varnum's Bedroom and Office



The Stephens family may have given up their large bedroom so that it could double as both General Varnum's sleeping quarters and office. Here Varnum could have conducted official military business during the day along with six other men, passing down the private staircase to the kitchen.



VAFO 3423 Sawbuck Table

Individual desks were impractical so General Varnum and his staff would have used the furniture available to them at the Stephens house as well as any furniture that they had brought with them. Two types of tables are represented here including a gate leg table with leaves that fold up or down as needed. The simple sawbuck table could accommodate up to four aides-de-camp using quills, ink, inkwells, paper, sanders, wax (for seals), document boxes, and military reference books they brought with them.

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VAFO 3351 Gate Leg Table



VAFO 1623 Settee; VAFO 30088 Sash

The fireplace provided heat for the room and a place to warm an officer after a day in the field. A wooden Windsor settee provides the perfect place for an aide to rest in between dispatches or for one of Varnum's staff to stow his sash that identifies him as an officer.

General Varnum may have used one of the Stephen family's beds, had one been available. This simple low post-style bed would have been a welcome change from a camp cot, giving him room to store a trunk underneath, as well as a pair of shoes. At night he would have kept warm under the wool wool blankets. During the day wool breeches and waistcoat would have helped. With such tight quarters, a folding field cot could be stored behind the bed while the room was used as an office.



VAFO 1904, Bed

Conclusion



Varnum and his staff did not remain at the Stephens house for long. Documentation suggests that the military vacated the house mid-April. At that time Varnum retired to one of the log huts that his soldiers had built. While the Stephens family may have been able to resume a more normal existence in their home, their farm was still in the middle of the encampment. Surrounded by huts and the drilling of soldiers, it is unlikely that life returned to normal for them until after the Continental Army left Valley Forge in June. After the army left, the Stephens still had to remove the huts from their property using them for fences and firewood. It was not until 1779 that farm production would return to pre-encampment levels.