

Valley Forge

National Historical Park
Pennsylvania

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Washington Reviewing his Troops at Valley Forge. From the painting by W. T. Trego. Courtesy Valley Forge Historical Society.

Crucible of Victory

"To see men without clothes to cover their nakedness, without blankets to lie upon, without shoes . . . without a house or hut to cover them until those could be built, and submitting without a murmur, is a proof of patience and obedience which, in my opinion, can scarcely be paralleled."

George Washington at Valley Forge, December 23, 1777.

Of all the places associated with America's War for Independence, none conveys more the impression of suffering, sacrifice, and ultimate triumph than Valley Forge. No battles were fought here, no bayonet charges or artillery bombardments took place, but during the winter of 1777-78 thousands of American soldiers died here nonetheless. Valley Forge is the story of an army's epic struggle to survive against terrible odds, against hunger, disease, and the unrelenting forces of nature.

The campaign which resulted in the Valley Forge encampment began in late August 1777 when Sir William Howe, commander in chief of British forces in North America, landed his veteran army at the upper end of Chesapeake Bay. His objective: Philadelphia, the patriot capital. The American commander, George Washington, maneuvered his Grand Army into position to defend the city. Howe's skillful tactics, combined with errors made by Washington's army, led to a British victory at the Brandywine and a draw at Germantown. The Continental Congress fled and the British occupied Philadelphia.

With the winter setting in, the prospects for further campaigning were greatly diminished, and Washington sought winter quarters for his men. Though several locations were proposed, he selected Valley Forge, 29 kilometers (18 miles) northwest of Philadelphia. It proved to be an excellent choice. Named for an iron forge on Valley Creek, the area was close enough to the British to keep their raiding and foraging parties out of the interior of Pennsylvania, yet far enough away to halt the threat of surprise British attacks. High ground made it easily defensible, and it was thought the surrounding farmland would ensure a steady source of supply.

A light snow covered the ground on December 19, 1777, when Washington's poorly fed, ill-equipped army, weary from long marches, struggled into Valley Forge. Cold winds blew as the 12,000 Continentals prepared for the fury of winter. Grounds for brigade encampments were selected, and defense lines were planned and begun. Within days of the army's arrival, the Schuylkill River, along the camp's northern boundary, was covered with ice. Snow was 15 centimeters (6 inches) deep. Though construction of about 2,000 huts provided shelter, it did little to offset the critical shortages that continually plagued the army.

Soldiers received irregular supplies of meat and bread, often getting their only nourishment from "firecake," a tasteless mixture of flour and water. So severe were conditions at times that

Washington despaired "that unless some great and capital change suddenly takes place . . . this Army must inevitably . . . Starve, dissolve, or disperse, in order to obtain subsistence in the best manner they can." Animals fared no better. Gen. Henry Knox, Washington's Chief of Artillery, wrote that hundreds of horses starved to death.

Clothing, too, was wholly inadequate. Long marches had destroyed shoes. Blankets were scarce. Tattered garments were seldom replaced. At one point these shortages caused nearly 4,000 men to be listed as unfit for duty.

Undernourished and poorly clothed, living in crowded, damp quarters, the army was ravaged by sickness and disease. Typhus, typhoid, dysentery, and pneumonia were among the killers that felled an estimated 2,000 men that winter. Although Washington repeatedly petitioned for relief, the Congress was unable to persuade the States to provide it and the soldiers continued to suffer.

Upgrading military efficiency, morale, and discipline were as vital to the well-being of the army as was its source of supply. The army had been handicapped in battle because training was administered to the units from a variety of field manuals, making coordinated battle movements awkward and difficult. The soldiers were trained but not uniformly. The task of developing and

carrying out an effective training program fell to "Baron" Friedrich von Steuben. This skilled Prussian drillmaster, recently arrived from Europe, tirelessly drilled and scolded the regiments into an effective fighting force. Intensive daily training, coupled with von Steuben's forceful manner, served to instill in the men renewed confidence in themselves and their ability to succeed.

The passing weeks of winter saw the army, under Washington's inspirational leadership, undergo a dramatic transformation. Slowly but steadily the endurance, bravery, and sacrifice of the soldiers began to tell. Increasing amounts of supplies and equipment came into camp. New troops arrived. Spring brought word of the French alliance with its guarantee of military support. Now a strong, dependable force, well-trained and hopeful of success, drilled on the Grand Parade.

Soon word of the British departure from Philadelphia brought a frenzied activity to the ranks of Washington's Grand Army. On June 19, 1778, six months after its arrival, the army marched away from Valley Forge in pursuit of the British who were moving toward New York. An ordeal had ended. The war would last for another 5 years, but for Washington, his men, and the nation to which they sought to give birth, a decisive victory had been won—a victory not of weapons but of will. The spirit of Valley Forge was now a part of the army and because of it the prospects for final victory were considerably brighter.



George Washington, from the portrait by Charles Willson Peale, 1780. Courtesy Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia.



Von Steuben Drilling American Troops, from the painting by Edwin Austin Abbey. Courtesy Pennsylvania House of Representatives.



Campaign of 1777

After landing at Head of Elk, Md., Sir William Howe's British army marched north to capture Philadelphia. Washington tried to block Howe at the Brandywine but

failed. The British occupied the patriot capital and the Americans established winter quarters at Valley Forge.

Commander in Chief

From the day he took command of the American armies in 1775 George Washington's faith in the moral righteousness of the American cause never wavered.

His character and purpose helped sustain his army at Valley Forge and secure aid from France for the struggling United States.

Links to the Past

Historical artifacts help establish relationships between past and present. The visitor center at Valley Forge contains a variety of objects designed to show what life

was like in the 1777-78 encampment. Thanks to a cooperative agreement with the Valley Forge Historical Society, one of the key artifacts on display at Valley Forge

National Historical Park is the sleeping marquee used by George Washington during the Revolution, perhaps at Valley Forge.

Drillmaster von Steuben

A large part of General von Steuben's success in training the soldiers of Washington's army at Valley Forge was achieved by his reliance on the power of example. He

formed a model company of 100 selected men and undertook its drill in person. The rapid progress of this company under von Steuben's skilled instruction made an

immediate appeal to the imagination of the whole army.

The Making of An Army

On December 19, 1777, when Washington's army struggled into camp at Valley Forge, tired, cold, and ill-equipped, it was lacking in much of the training essential for consistent success on the battlefield. On June 19, 1778, after a 6-month encampment, this same army emerged to pursue and successfully engage the British army at the Battle of Monmouth in New Jersey. The ordered ranks, martial appearance, revived spirit, and fighting skill of the American soldiers spoke of a great transformation having occurred amid the cold, sickness, and hardship that was Valley Forge.

The man most responsible for this transformation was Friedrich von Steuben, onetime member of the elite General Staff of Fred-

erick the Great of Prussia. No longer in the Prussian army, indeed without employment of any kind, von Steuben came to America seeking to offer his military skills to the patriot cause. When he arrived at Valley Forge from France on February 23, 1778, he was armed with a letter of introduction from Benjamin Franklin. Washington saw great promise in the Prussian and almost immediately assigned him the duties of Acting Inspector General with the task of developing and carrying out an effective training program.

Numerous obstacles threatened success. No standard American training manuals existed, troop morale was low, and von Steuben himself spoke little English. Undaunted, he drafted his own manual in French. His aides, often working late into the night, then

translated his work into English. The translations were in turn copied and passed to the individual regiments and companies, which carried out the prescribed drill the following day.

Von Steuben shocked many American officers by breaking tradition to work directly with the men. One officer wrote of von Steuben's "peculiar grace" as he took "under his direction a squad of men in the capacity of drill sergeant." From dawn to dusk his familiar voice was heard in camp above the sounds of marching men and shouted commands. Soon companies, regiments, then brigades moved smartly from line to column, column to line; loaded muskets with precision; and drove imaginary redcoats from the field by skillful charges with the bayonet.

When the Grand Army paraded on May 6, 1778, to celebrate the French alliance with America, von Steuben received the honor of organizing the day's activities. On that day the Grand Parade became a showplace for the united American army. Cannons boomed in salute. Thousands of muskets fired the ceremonial "feu de joie," a running fire that passed up and down the double ranks of infantrymen. Cheers echoed across the fields. The good drilling order and imposing appearance which the troops presented during the Alliance Day ceremonies demonstrated their remarkable progress in developing as a fighting force in the short time since von Steuben's arrival. Washington, his Continentals, and their French allies could now proceed with the war. Independence seemed assured.



1 Visitor Center

Start your tour at the Visitor Center, located at the junction of Pa. 23 and 363. No admission fees or reservations are necessary. Here an audio-visual program and exhibits, including Washington's sleeping mar-

quee, introduce you to the story of the 1777-78 winter encampment, and the park staff will help you plan your visit. A bookstore sells a variety of informational publications.

2 Muhlenberg Brigade

Reconstructed huts mark the site where Gen. Peter Muhlenberg's Brigade manned the outer line of defense. Here interpreters in period costumes demonstrate conditions of soldier life.

3 Memorial Arch

The National Memorial Arch, dedicated in 1917, commemorates the "patience and fidelity" of the soldiers who wintered at Valley Forge in 1777-78.

4 Wayne Statue

The bronze equestrian Wayne Statue stands in the area where Pennsylvania troops commanded by Gen. Anthony Wayne were encamped. The statue faces toward the general's home in nearby Chester County.

5 Headquarters

The focal point of camp activities was the Isaac Potts House, Washington's Headquarters. Also in this area are the Dewees House and the reconstructed huts which housed the Commander in Chief's Guards.

6 Redoubt 4

Redoubt 4 helped to guard the northern approaches to the encampment. The area around this work was occupied by troops commanded by Brig. Gen. Jedediah Huntington.

7 Redoubt 3

Redoubt 3 anchored one end of the inner line of defense. Overlooking one of the encampment roads, this work defended the southern approaches to Valley Forge.

8 Artillery Park

Most of the cannon brought to Valley Forge were massed in the Artillery Park. Here, under the command of Brig. Gen. Henry Knox, artillery was stored and repaired and gun crews were trained and drilled.

In the event of an attack the cannon could be dispatched from this central location to wherever needed.

9 Varnum's Quarters

Gen. James Varnum's Quarters. This early 18th-century farmhouse overlooks the Grand Parade where the army drilled and maneuvered under the direction of General von Steuben, whose statue stands nearby.

10 Chapel and Museum

Located on private property within the park are the Washington Memorial Chapel and the Museum of the Valley Forge Historical Society. The museum contains artifacts relating to the Revolution. Fee charged.

About Your Visit

Valley Forge is perhaps the best-known place name associated with the American Revolution. To truly enjoy the park, it is important that visitors understand the significance of the events associated with the winter encampment of 1777-78. The National Park Service provides various programs, tours, and other interpretive activities to help you grasp more fully the dramatic story Valley Forge has to tell. The recommended first stop is the park's visitor center.

A self-guided tour route, keyed to numbered stops on the map, will take you past extensive remains and reconstructions of major forts and lines of earthworks, the Artillery Park, Washington's

Headquarters, quarters of other officers, and the Grand Parade where General von Steuben rebuilt the army and where news of the French alliance was announced on May 6, 1778. These, plus reconstructed huts, memorials, monuments, and markers, help to tell the story of the men who at Valley Forge helped to write an imperishable chapter in the history of America's struggle for independence.

You may wish to take advantage of the regularly scheduled bus tour offered from mid-April through October. For a fee, the tour, featuring a taped narration, allows you to spend as much time as you wish at historically significant areas in the park.

A dominant feature of the park is the massive National Memorial Arch bearing on one face the inscription: "Naked and starving as they are, we cannot enough admire the incomparable patience and fidelity of the soldiery. Washington at Valley Forge, February 16, 1778."

Information on restaurants, overnight accommodations, or other attractions in the greater Valley Forge area is available at the Pennsylvania Travel desk in the visitor center. Also located in the visitor center is a bookstore containing a wide range of publications. A snack bar and souvenir shop is open for visitors' convenience at the Washington Headquarters area.

The park has three picnic areas: Varnum's, Wayne's Woods, and Betzwood. No open fires are permitted, but both the Varnum and Betzwood areas have grills that may be used for fires. Picnicking is on a first-come, first-served basis and reservations cannot be made. There is no camping in the park. There is a 6-mile bike/foot trail and 10 miles of horse trails. Bicycles may be rented during the summer months. Please do not picnic or engage in recreational activities near historic sites and buildings. Drive and park vehicles only in designated areas. We hope that you have a pleasant visit. If you have any questions, please contact a park ranger or write the Superintendent, Valley Forge National Historical Park, Valley Forge, PA 19481.

