

Valley Forge

Valley Forge
National Historical Park
Pennsylvania

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Replicated huts mark the encampment site of Gen. Peter Muhlenberg's brigade.
DMJ, TICINO

Skilled and Capable

Ask someone to think of Valley Forge and they will nearly always envision an anonymous group of soldiers struggling against winter's fury and clothed in nothing but rags. Certainly hardship did occur at Valley Forge, but the encampment experience could be characterized as "suffering as usual," for privation was the Continental soldier's constant companion. The reason many Americans picture Valley Forge as the pinnacle of misery is that this early and romanticized version of the encampment story became an important parable to teach us about American perseverance. The portrayal of starving troops, however, has kept us from getting to know the people of the Continental Army—who they were, why they joined the army, and what they accomplished at Valley Forge.

To better understand and appreciate what happened at Valley Forge it is helpful to know how the encampment fits into the context of the American Revolution (1775–1783). In 1777 British strategy included a plan to capture Philadelphia, the patriot capital. To accomplish this, the British commander in chief, Sir William Howe, landed nearly 17,000 of His Majesty's finest troops at the head of Chesapeake Bay. To oppose them, Gen. George Washington marched his 12,000-man army from New Jersey.

People often picture the Continental Army of 1777 as a ragtag bunch of inexperienced fighters. But Washington's men fought with skill and were often on the offensive while campaigning against superior numbers of professional soldiers. Although they

lost two key battles, as well as Philadelphia, to the British, Washington's soldiers emerged from these experiences with a renewed confidence in their fighting abilities. They only needed a little more training to reach their full potential.

As wintry weather approached, armies often withdrew to fixed camps. Transportation problems made large-scale winter operations infeasible. In choosing a site for quarters, Washington had to balance the Continental Congress's wish for some type of winter campaign aimed at dislodging the British from the capital against the needs of his weary and poorly supplied army. By mid-December he had decided to encamp at Valley Forge. From this location, 20 miles northwest of Philadelphia, the army was close enough to maintain pressure on the British yet far enough away to prevent a surprise attack.

While the soldiers who entered camp on December 19, 1777, were not well-supplied, they were not downtrodden. This is attested to by an anonymous observer who recounted his visit to Valley Forge in the *New Jersey Gazette* on December 25:

"I have just returned from spending a few days with the army. I found them employed in building little huts for their winter quarters. It was natural to expect that they wished for more comfortable accommodations, after the hardships of a most severe campaign; but I could discover nothing like a sigh of discontent at their situation. . . . On the contrary, my ears were agreeably

struck every evening, in riding through the camp, with a variety of military and patriotic songs and every countenance I saw, wore the appearance of cheerfulness or satisfaction."

Army records and eyewitness accounts speak of a skilled and capable force in charge of its own destiny. Rather than wait for deliverance, the army located supplies, built log cabins to stay in, constructed makeshift clothing and gear, and cooked subsistence meals of their own concoction. Provisions, though never abundant in the early months of the encampment, were available. Shortages of clothing did cause severe hardship for a number of men, but many soldiers had a full uniform, and the well-equipped units patrolled, foraged, and defended the camp.

The sound that would have reached your ears on approaching the camp was not that of a forlorn howling wind, but rather that of hammers, axes, saws, and shovels at work. Under the direction of military engineers, the men built a city of 2,000-odd huts laid out in parallel lines along planned military avenues. The troops also constructed miles of trenches, five earthen forts (redoubts), and a state-of-the-art bridge over the Schuylkill River.

Disease, not cold or starvation, was the true scourge of the camp. Army returns (reports) reveal that two-thirds of the nearly 2,000 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. Dedicated

surgeons, capable nurses, a smallpox inoculation program, and camp sanitation regulations limited the death tolls.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the encampment was the army's maturation into a more professional force. The Continental Army was primed and ready to move on to the next level just as a charismatic former Prussian army officer, Baron Friedrich Wilhelm Augustus von Steuben, arrived in camp in February 1778. Von Steuben's hands-on training program helped the army become a more proficient marching machine. The Baron inspired a "relish for the trade of soldiering" that gave the troops a new sense of purpose and helped sustain them through many trials as they stuck to the task of securing independence.

On May 6, 1778, the army joyously celebrated France's alliance with and formal recognition of the United States as a sovereign power. The expected arrival of the French greatly altered British war plans and triggered their evacuation of Philadelphia in June. Washington rapidly set troops in motion to bring on a general engagement with the enemy. On June 28, at the Battle of Monmouth, N.J., Washington's men demonstrated their improved battle prowess when they forced the British from the field. By summer Washington could claim that the war effort was going well. Valley Forge was not the darkest hour of the Revolutionary War; it is a place where an already accomplished group of professionals stood their ground, honed their craft, and thwarted one of the major British offensives of the war.



Campaign of 1777

After landing at Head of Elk on Chesapeake Bay, Sir William Howe's army marched north to capture Philadelphia. Although the Continental Army lost the battles of Brandywine and Germantown, and al-

lowed the British to capture the patriot capital, it had performed well and gained confidence. The move to Valley Forge prevented the British from making inroads into Pennsylvania's interior.

Commander in Chief

Gen. George Washington's faith in the moral rightness of the American cause never wavered. At Valley Forge he attempted to balance the wants of hungry soldiers and dissatisfied officers

against the nearly incessant demands from political leaders that he pursue the war more aggressively against the British occupying the patriot capital—all while operating in a disputed area where

friend and foe were difficult to distinguish. The character and purpose that helped sustain him and his soldiers is reflected in Charles Willson Peale's 1780 portrait of the general (above).

Links to the Past

Historic artifacts help to establish relationships with the past. The Welcome Center exhibit, "Determined to Persevere," featuring objects from the park's Neumann Collection, will bring you into

closer contact with those who served at Valley Forge.

The Continental Army used the rolling terrain of Valley Forge intensively in laying out defense lines and living and working areas. When

the army left in June 1778 the land was devastated. On a visit 10 years later, however, Washington saw few remaining traces of the encampment. The land had recovered. Today, in addition to its beauty (reflected

above in this photograph of the Grand Parade near the Maurice Stephens house), Valley Forge provides important habitat for animals and exceptional recreational opportunities for visitors.

Drillmaster von Steuben

Baron Friedrich W.A. von Steuben, of Prussia, volunteered his services to the revolutionary cause. Much of his success in training the soldiers of Washington's army at Valley Forge was achieved by his reli-

ance on the power of example. He formed a model company of 100 selected men and undertook its drill in person, as depicted above in Edwin Abbey's well-known painting. The rapid progress of this

company under General von Steuben's skilled instruction made an immediate appeal to the imagination of the whole army.

Common Ground

From New England, there arrived a company of soldiers, composed of whites, blacks and a few Stockbridge Indians.

—A Moravian farmer from Bethlehem, Pa., who observed recruits heading for Valley Forge, spring 1778.

By the end of 1776 a series of reverses made it apparent that an army based on the militia-type system of short enlistments could not compete against the British. In order to put the army on firmer footing, the Continental Congress allowed General Washington to recruit soldiers for three years or the duration of the war beginning in 1777. In return for such arduous service Congress offered land bounties and monetary bonuses. The men who answered this call formed the bulk of a standing army that fought for the rest of the war and represented a large slice of Revolutionary War society.

The troops who came to camp included men from all 13 original states and regiments from all except South Carolina and Georgia. The encampment brought together men, women, and children of nearly all ages, from all walks of life, from different ethnic backgrounds, and from various religions. While statistically most were of English descent, the ranks also included persons of African, American Indian, Austrian, Dutch, French, German, Irish, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Prussian, Scottish, Spanish, and Swedish descent.

Motivation for enlistment varied, but many who joined in the fight sought to secure their own blessings of liberty while they fought to gain their country's independence from Britain. Many recent European arrivals sought fortune and honor by enlisting in the regiments of

the middle states they now called home. In fact, two-thirds of the Pennsylvania troops were foreign-born. Women followed the army to be with their husbands and contribute actively to the cause. The women present at Valley Forge included hundreds of enlisted men's wives who followed the army year round, and some general officers' wives on extended visits. The army compensated full-time women followers for rendering such valuable services as sewing, laundering, and nursing.

Promises of freedom motivated thousands of enslaved African Americans to join Continental and British forces. In the Continental Army, bound individuals yearning for liberty and wages served alongside freemen in search of a better life. Continental regiments were integrated and most included patriots of African descent. In order to pre-

serve their culture and prevent encroachment upon their rich western domain, most American Indians sided with the British. Political, religious, and personal ties, however, led some tribes to support the patriots. Hundreds of Indians enlisted in the Continental Army and many others engaged as scouts in specialized units. One of the most notable contributions came from the Oneida, who sent aid and a contingent of warriors to Valley Forge. Roman Catholics and Jews, though representing a small portion of the Revolutionary War era population, aggressively supported the patriot cause out of a desire to defend both homeland and religious freedom. The successful conclusion of the Revolution marked only the beginning of the struggle for some individuals for personal liberty. As the sound of combat grew fainter, the battle for individual rights began.

Exploring Valley Forge

Valley Forge received its name from the iron forge built along Valley Creek in the 1740s. By the time of the Revolution, a sawmill and gristmill had been added, making the place an important supply base for the Americans. The British destroyed the forge and mills in 1777, and only ruins remained at the time of the encampment.

The National Park Service provides various programs, tours, and other interpretive activities to help you understand the significance of the events associated with Valley Forge and the encampment of 1777-78. Park rangers make every effort to accommodate all visitors in these presentations. It is the goal of the National Park Service to make the park accessible to all visitors.

The recommended first stop is the park's Welcome Center. There an 18-minute film, shown every 30 minutes, provides an introduction to life during the encampment. Displays and artifacts in the exhibit area illustrate what life was like in the camp. A wide range of publications and theme-related items are available in the Encampment Store. Information on restaurants, overnight accommodations, and other attractions in the greater Valley Forge area is also available at the Welcome Center.

A self-guiding tour route (see map below) takes you past extensive remains and replicas of major forts and lines of earthworks, the Artillery Park, Washington's Headquarters, and the Grand Parade, where General von Steuben trained the army.

These, plus replicated 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.

Many nearby homes and farmhouses became quarters for general officers during the encampment. Political feelings in the area were divided, with most residents wishing to be left free from the conflict. The occupation of Valley Forge ended that wish and brought the war to their doorstep. Some officer quarters still stand, although most of these have been altered over the years. Some are included in the park tour; others that are used for park business are closed to the public.

Other points of interest include trace remains of historic roads, the site of Fatland Ford—the low-water-crossing point used by the British army en route to capturing the patriot capital of Philadelphia—and the site of Sullivan's Bridge, a temporary structure based on a Roman design and built early in the encampment to link Washington's army with important supply and patrol areas in the country to the north. A flood washed out Sullivan's Bridge shortly after the army abandoned camp. A historical marker along the River Trail marks the bridge's location. The marker is accessible only from the north side of the Schuylkill River.

Instead of driving yourself, you may wish to take advantage of the seasonal trolley tours offered

at the Welcome Center. For a fee, the tour provides a more direct and informative way to travel to the most historically significant areas in the park. A cell phone tour is also available. Just look for the cell phone tour icon at various places throughout the park, then dial 484-396-1018. Follow the prompts to learn more about the park's many significant features.

The park has three picnic areas: Varnum's, Wayne's Woods, and Betzwood. No open fires are permitted, but the Betzwood area has grills that may be used for fires. Picnicking is on a first-come, first-served basis; reservations cannot be made. There is no camping in the park. The park has almost 30 miles of trails. The use of skates, skateboards, and in-line skates is pro-

hibited on the bike/foot trails and all park roads. Mountain bikes are restricted to established and approved trails and park roads. Cross-country use through fields and wooded areas is prohibited. Please do not picnic or engage in recreational activities near historic sites and buildings. Drive and park vehicles only in designated areas. Pets must be leashed and attended at all times.

For More Information
Valley Forge National Historical Park
1400 North Outer Line Drive
King of Prussia, PA 19406-1009
www.nps.gov/vafo
610-783-1077
In an emergency dial 911.

©GPO:2007-330-358/00788 Reprint 2007
Printed on recycled paper.



1 Welcome Center

Start your tour here, at the junction of Pa. 23 and North Gulph Road, where an audio-visual program and exhibits introduce you to the story of the 1777-78 encampment. Park staff will gladly help you plan your visit and

provide information on seasonal programs, special events, and other park activities. An auto tape tour is available for purchase. Restrooms are wheelchair-accessible.



2 Muhlenberg Brigade

Replicated huts mark the site where Gen. Peter Muhlenberg's Brigade anchored the outer line of defense.



3 National Memorial Arch

This dominant feature of the park was dedicated in 1917 and commemorates the "patience and fidelity" of the soldiers who wintered at Valley Forge in 1778.



4 Wayne Statue

This bronze equestrian statue stands in an area where Pennsylvania troops commanded by Gen. Anthony Wayne made their encampment. 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. Nearby are the David Potts House and replicas of the huts that housed Washington's Guards.



6 Redoubt 4 (closed)

Redoubts 4 and 3 anchored the right and left flanks of the inner, or second, line of defense. A trench connected the redoubts to form a formidable defense line against any British attack that might overrun the outer line of



7 Redoubt 3

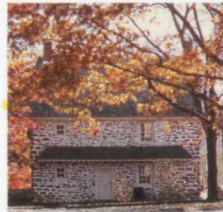
defense. Since the British never laid siege to the camp, the system of fortifications at Valley Forge was never tested. Vestiges of the trench constructed by the army are still visible along the left side of the Inner Line Drive.



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 they were needed.



9 Varnum's Quarters

Gen. James Varnum occupied this early 18th-century farmhouse overlooking the Grand Parade. Nearby stands a statue of General von Steuben, who supervised the training of the Continental Army.



10 Washington Memorial Chapel

Located on private property within the park, the chapel hosts an active congregation. The beautifully appointed interior of this early 20th-century church commemorates George Washington's service to his country.

