



Bullet'n Backstory

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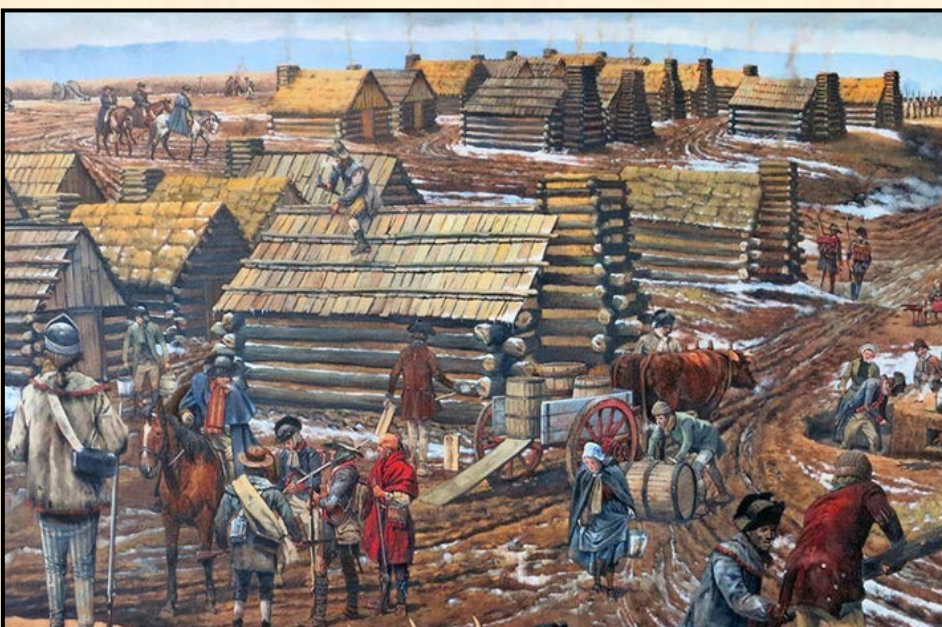
The Making of the Continental Army: Six Months at Valley Forge (1777-78)



From December 1777 to June 1778, Gen. George Washington and the Continental Army made Winter Camp at Valley Forge, 18 miles from Philadelphia. The Army, its commander, and their allies entered camp worn out and undersupplied. Yet, after suffering through a difficult winter, the Army emerged as a more united force than ever before. The story of Valley Forge quickly became legendary, but like all legends, there is a heavy dose of myth associated with the Continental Army's time at Valley Forge. The region near Valley Forge, near the juncture of Valley Creek and the Schuylkill River, had been occupied by indigenous tribes from as early as 10,000 BCE through the 17th century. The last indigenous people in the area were the Lenape (Delaware), who were pushed out with the arrival of European settlers. In 1742, Quakers established an iron forge in the valley. By 1777, the land had been cleared for agriculture, and was dominated by 18 prosperous landowners.

British strategy at this stage of the American Revolution included capturing the American capital of Philadelphia. To this end, British commander Sir William Howe set sail from New York City in July 1777 with 17,000 troops and landed at the head of the Chesapeake Bay. In response, Washington marched his 12,000-man army from New Jersey, through Philadelphia, to block Howe's army. Though the Continental Army lost at Brandywine, Germantown, and Philadelphia, it grew more united, gaining confidence along with experience. In late 1777, the British occupied Philadelphia, prompting Washington to move his army to Valley Forge, which was a day's march from the city. Washington's unit, along with 400 women and children, reached the camp on Dec. 19, 1777. Though tired and poorly supplied, morale was strong within the Continental Army.

The biggest issue early on was acquiring shelter. The Army formed construction teams, which built nearly 2,000 cabins that were 14 by 16 foot. They also built miles of trenches, five earthen forts, and a bridge over the Schuylkill River. When complete, Valley Forge became the fourth largest settlement in the colonies, and one of its most diverse, with multiple colonies, classes, races, languages, and religions represented by its occupants.



Construction of log cabins at Valley Forge

The traditional story of Valley Forge suggests that suffering from cold and starvation led the Army to become more unified and patriotic, but that is not the case. Hardships occurred, but no more so than at any other winter camp. Contrary to popular belief, the winter of 1777-78 was not particularly cold or snowy. The main issue was one of resupply, which became nearly impossible due to muddy roads. The supply issue forced the Army to forage for supplies, make and repair their own clothing, and ration food. The most difficult time came in March, when clothing shortages led to 3,000 soldiers being declared unfit for duty. Once the bridge was complete, supply issues eased. With this, the Army could forage on the north side of the river and numerous local farmers could travel to camp to sell goods. The bridge also allowed Washington to send regular patrols north of camp to check British movements.

Warmer weather ironically led to outbreaks of influenza and typhoid in the camp, killing nearly 2,000 people. Reports show that two-thirds of those who died succumbed to diseases during the spring, by which time the supply issue had been largely solved. The most important factor unifying the Continental Army at Valley Forge was Washington’s ability to draw the Prussian officer Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben to camp. He believed the Army needed better training but recognized that the standard European military system was ill suited to colonial militia. Instead, he provided hands-on lessons, beginning with the most veteran troops. Under von Steuben’s tutelage, the Continental Army made remarkable progress, becoming a more effective fighting force.



Reenactor at Valley Forge National Park

In May, Washington learned that France had recognized the United States as a sovereign power and formed an alliance with the colonists. By this time, Washington had amassed nearly 20,000 troops at Valley Forge in preparation for the resumption of campaigning. These factors prompted the British to abandon Philadelphia in order to better defend New York City. Washington sent a small force to retake Philadelphia and – on June 19, 1778 – marched from Valley Forge in pursuit of the British. On June 28, at the Battle of Monmouth, New Jersey, the newly trained Continental Army forced the British from the field. Historians have suggested that Valley Forge was the birthplace of the American Army. During the Army’s

stay, von Steuben and American officers revolutionized training, while distinctive branches, like the Corps of Engineers, emerged. The Continental Army was stronger and more unified, which served them well from the Battle of Monmouth through the siege of Yorktown in 1781.

After the Continental Army left Valley Forge, the local farmers quickly recovered the land. Before the end of the war, the huts were gone, farms were replanted, and previously cleared woodlands were growing again. In 1893, Valley Forge Park became Pennsylvania’s first state park. Designation as a National Historic Landmark came in 1961 and – in 1976 – it became Valley Forge National Park, as a bicentennial gift from the State of Pennsylvania. Today, the park includes 3,500 acres and hosts more than one million visitors per year. ~ ~ Dr. Paul-Thomas Ferguson

JMC Historical Document Collection

The JMC Public and Congressional Affairs Office (PCA) maintains the JMC Archives, which collects and maintains historically significant records, including: emails, manuscripts, letters, reports, studies, images, videos, films, photographs, oral history interviews, briefings, SOPs, policies, decision papers, memoranda, statistics, newspapers, newsletters, brochures, maps, blue prints, drawings, artifacts, and more. Such records are pertinent to the Army’s institutional knowledge of active and predecessor installations, the ammunition industrial base, and JMC missions. JMC regularly uses these materials to research command history, and to answer research queries. When JMC workers leave positions or make physical moves, it is vital that their records be assessed before disposal. If employees are uncertain about the historical value of materials, the best policy is to make the items available to Command Historian Keri Pleasant (keri.j.pleasant.civ@army.mil) or Archivist Paul Ferguson (paul.t.ferguson14.civ@army.mil) in Room 661.

This Month in Military History

- Feb. 3, 1945:** Nearly 1,500 B-17 Flying Fortresses from the USAAF Eighth Air Force drop 3,000 tons of bombs on Berlin to destroy the city’s rail network. The resulting fire lasts for four days.
- Feb. 10, 1763:** Britain and France conclude the Treaty of Paris, bringing an end to the French and Indian War (Seven Years’ War). The treaty terms include: France ceding Canada, the eastern half of the Mississippi valley, and several Caribbean colonies to Britain.
- Feb. 17, 1815:** President James Madison and the U.S. Congress ratify the Treaty of Ghent, more than a month after it was signed in Europe, ending the War of 1812.
- Feb. 24, 1797:** Following the Battle of Fishguard, Wales, an invasion force of 1,400 soldiers from Revolutionary France, led by Irish-American Colonel William Tate, is forced to surrender to a combined force of cavalry and volunteer militia. It is the last time an invading army sets foot on British soil.