

BROADSIDE

A Journal of the Wars for Independence for Students

VALLEY FORGE

On December 19, 1777 George Washington's rag tag remnants of the Continental Army trudged into his chosen site for a winter encampment, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Downtrodden, disheveled, some men not wearing shoes, his veterans had been bested several times since September 1777 as they fought to defend and then recapture, Philadelphia, the capitol of the United States from their British adversaries. They numbered 12,000 men and 400 women and children. Washington chose the site 18 miles northwest of Philadelphia to keep a close eye on the forces of Sir William Howe whose officers and men enjoyed the warmth of Philadelphia homes and to keep himself between the British and New York City a particular obsession with Washington. American folklore would have us believe that the winter at Valley Forge was a winter of misery of an army covered with snow. Nothing could be further from the truth; rather it was a mild winter by comparison to Washington's other winter encampments but wet as well. By the time the army marched out of camp in June 1778 2,000 people had perished mostly from disease like typhoid, dysentery, and influenza. Crowded condition inside the encampment lent itself to the natural profusion of germs.

Immediately his men went to work felling trees with axes and other hand tools. Even though they were in dire straits as a fighting force they went to work with vigor always encouraged by their commander. When they were done they erected 1,500 makeshift log huts inside the perimeter of two miles of defensive lines facing Philadelphia including inner and outer line defenses, four redoubts with spike abatis and several smaller redans. The terrain lent itself to form a natural triangle that would make a British attack risky. Valley Forge was also nestled along the banks of the Schuylkill River. When completed Valley Forge would be the fourth largest city in the United States. It would be a diverse concentration of peoples too, for the Continental Army was integrated. Living at Valley Forge were foreign noblemen like the Marquis de Lafayette, free and enslaved African Americans, and some members of Indian tribes that had pitched into the American cause for Independence. Walking between huts and the fortifications one could hear a variety of languages, French, German, Polish, and Gullah.



Later Print of Washington at Valley Forge (Library of Congress)

"Our prospect was indeed dreary. In our miserable condition, to go into the wild woods and build us habitations to stay (not to live) in, in such a weak, starved and naked condition, was appalling in the highest degree.

- Joseph Plumb Martin on

For his headquarters Washington selected a stone house along the banks of the Schuylkill and on the eastern flank of the camp. As armies of the 18th century rarely went into combat, during the winter, Washington could have easily returned to his estate, Mount Vernon in Virginia, which he had not seen in two years. But he wanted to be with his men. He would, though not to their extent, suffer with them in their privations. His headquarter would be for the next six months a beehive of activity as Washington sought to refit, resupply and retrain his army.

Shortly after arriving at Valley Forge Washington learned the news that the Northern Department of the Continental Army, under the command of General Horatio Gates, soundly defeated a large British Army at Saratoga, New York. In the wake of the American victory at Saratoga, Benjamin Franklin convinced the French to not only ally themselves militarily with the new United States, but also recognize American Independence.



MAJOR GENERAL BARON STEUBEN.

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In early 1778 Washington's Army received a surprising gift in the presence of Friedrich Von Steuben known to history as the Drillmaster of the American Revolution. He was a captain in the Prussian Army who connected with Benjamin Franklin in Paris. Franklin always had a keen eye for potential supporters of the American cause and gave von Steuben a letter of introduction to George Washington and Congress. Von Steuben's arrival in America was fortuitous for the American cause. While Washington's Army encamped at Valley Forge, von Steuben trained Washington's army into an effective fighting force. A drill manual was written first in German, then translated in French and finally into English. A model unit was formed so that they could train fellow soldiers in their mold. Von Steuben endeared himself to his men with his excessive use of profanity and bombast which the American soldiers found entertaining. Nevertheless, he was respected and when the Continental Army marched out of Valley Forge in the Spring of 1778 they were a much more cohesive unit and in June proved themselves at the battle of Monmouth, New Jersey. Von Steuben would remain with the American Army through the remainder of the war, participate in the surrender of British forces at Yorktown, Virginia and settle down to life after the war in upstate New York.

At the same time Von Steuben was whipping the Continental Army into fighting form, Washington ordered an overhaul of the Quartermaster Department. A better chain of securing supplies from Congress was worked out, supply sources were streamlined and, systems of hygiene were put in place. What emerged from Valley Forge was a foundation from which the American Army would grow.

During the encampment Washington was seemingly everywhere instilling courage and confidence in his men, demonstrating his stamina, and allegiance to the cause of creating a republic out of the depths of war. His patriotic ardor proved valuable and in the words of Private Joseph Plumb Martin from Connecticut, "We had engaged in the defense of our country and were willing, nay, we were determined to persevere."

In May 1778, shortly before the Continental Army broke camp, word arrived that France had signed a treaty of alliance with the United States, recognizing American independence and openly supplying the Americans with men and material. Washington's men lustily shouted "Huzzah!" when they heard the news. Rumors in the history mill have it that Washington enjoyed several glasses of Madera, making the rather taciturn and stoic commander rather jocular.

With news of the French alliance, the British evacuated Philadelphia returning to their stronghold at New York City. With fifes and drums playing and sporting new uniforms and better weapons, the Continental Army marched out of Valley Forge on June 19, 1778 with a new sense of purpose and an elated esprit des corps. On June 28 Washington's Army caught up with the rear elements of the evacuating British at Monmouth, New Jersey and fought a pitched battle with the British. The Continentals went toe to toe with their foe proving they were a force to be reckoned with, holding the field at the end of battle.

For three more years the Americans and British would wage war in America. Peace and independence would come in 1783. The crucible of the American experience at Valley Forge went a long way in ensuring not an inevitable but an eventual American victory over the world's mightiest power. And Valley Forge would become synonymous with American valor and heroism in the coming centuries, etched into American memory and consciousness.



Benjamin Franklin signing the formal Treaty of Alliance with the ministers of King Louis XVI. Though France expressed interest in the American cause before, news of a serious partnership was exactly what Washington and his troops needed at the end of a miserable winter. (Library of Congress)