

Valley Forge

Valley Forge is where George Washington and the 12,000 man Continental Army spent the winter of 1777-1778 during the American Revolution. Valley Forge is twenty miles away from Philadelphia. Earlier in the year, Philadelphia had been taken by the British. Washington chose Valley Forge for the Continental Army's winter quarters to stay close enough to the British to keep them in check, but also far enough away to avoid any surprise attacks.

The Continental Army spent the winter low on supplies. They had little food and clothing. George Washington wrote to Congress asking for money for supplies. He wrote, "There is one thing more to which I would take the liberty of soliciting your most serious and constant attention; to wit, the cloathing of your Troops, and the procuring of every possible supply in your power from time to time for that end. . . . We had in Camp . . . not less than 2898 men unfit for duty, by reason of their being barefoot and otherwise naked. . . . I flatter myself the care and attention of the States will be directed to the supply of Shoes, Stockings and Blankets."

The troops weren't only low on clothing, but also food. Washington wrote to Patrick Henry that, "We have experienced little less than a famine in camp." The main source of food was what the soldiers called "firecakes," which were made by mixing flour and water and cooking it in an iron pot. Washington estimated that about a third of the men did not have proper shoes or coats.

Many of the men suffered from disease while at Valley Forge. 2,000 men died at Valley Forge, two-thirds of them died from diseases such as typhus, dysentery, typhoid fever, and influenza. Typhus is a disease caused by bacteria carried by lice, fleas, and ticks. It results in headache, chills, fever, pain, and a rash. Dysentery is a disease caused by eating food that has been touched by unwashed hands. Dysentery results in the inflammation of the large intestine which causes stomach pain and bloody diarrhea. Typhoid fever is also caused by contaminated food. When the bacteria reaches the blood stream, an infection occurs. It causes headache, aching, fever, loss of appetite, and diarrhea or constipation. While typhus, dysentery, and typhoid fever are caused by bacteria in unclean conditions, influenza (the flu) comes from a virus. It causes fever, chills, weakness, pain, and soreness in the head and stomach.

Although supplies and food were low, the men at Valley Forge didn't sit around complaining. They spent the winter working. They built log cabins, huts, trenches, and a bridge. They went on scouting parties in the surrounding areas looking for supplies and food.

The men also spent their time at Valley Forge learning how to become a better trained army. A French man, the Marquis de Lafayette, helped organize the army. A Prussian (German) man by the name of Baron Friedrich von Steuben came to Valley Forge to help train the men. Prussia had a long history of being a very well trained and powerful military. Von Steuben had fought in battles for Frederick the Great, the leader of Prussia, during the Seven Years' War. Von Steuben taught the men at Valley Forge how to march and stay in formation on the battlefield, how to use a bayonet, and with the help of Marquis de Lafayette and Alexander Hamilton, he wrote a training manual for the army.

The army at Valley Forge included men from all 13 original colonies (states). There were men from many different ethnicities, including people of English, African, American Indian, Austrian, Dutch, French, German, Irish, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Scottish, Spanish, and Swedish descent. African slaves had been promised freedom for their service with the army. They served alongside the free white men, not in segregated units. Most American Indians took the side of the British, but there were hundreds of Indians at Valley Forge with the Continental Army. Many of them were of the Oneida nation, one of the five nations that make up the Iroquois Confederacy. There were about 500 women and children at Valley Forge. Women helped with sewing, cleaning, laundry, and as nurses.

While there were hardships at Valley Forge as supplies and food were low and disease spread quickly, Valley Forge was a turning point for the Continental Army. The Continental Army emerged from Valley Forge stronger and better trained to fight and ultimately defeat the British.

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