

The Winter at Valley Forge

When in your life have you faced adversity? Have there been times when seemingly endless obstacles block your path to success? The story of Founding Father George Washington and his troops at Valley Forge during the 1777-1778 winter may shed some light on the power of resilience and perseverance.

In the fall of 1777, the American colonies were fully engrossed in the war for their independence from Great Britain. The fighting had begun in April 1775 with the Battles of Lexington and Concord, though American dissatisfaction with British management of the colonies stretched back well before the two sides came to blows on the battlefield. In July 1776, America's legislature, the Second Continental Congress, formally voted to break away from Britain, famously expressing its discontent via the Declaration of Independence.

Despite the desire of the Americans to form an independent state, Britain stood ardently opposed to allowing its valuable North American colonies to exit Crown rule. After all, Britain had just emerged victorious in the Seven Years' War, and it did not want that effort — including North American land gains from France — to have been in vain. Indeed, the Americans would have to fight for the right to self-govern, and with the winter of 1777 approaching, American victory was no sure thing.

One of the great issues facing the Americans in their quest for independence was the Continental Army's inexperience, especially compared to the renowned British troops. Still, the Continental Army had a natural leader at the helm in General George Washington, a cunning Virginian who, less than a year prior, had led his men to a key victory on Christmas night in Trenton. In the aftermath of the Americans' Christmas triumph, the British planned to crush revolutionary spirit by taking Philadelphia, the aspiring nation's provisional capital. In August 1777, British troops led by General William Howe advanced on Philadelphia and, by September 26, they controlled the revolutionary capital.¹

The Continental Congress fled west to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and the outlook for the Americans was bleak. Winning a war after losing one's own capital city was, particularly at this time, a stark improbability. Nevertheless, General Washington was determined to spend the winter — during which time, because of the elements, there would likely be little fighting — bettering the Continental Army and plotting a path to victory.



Beginning in late October, General Washington enlisted the help of local officers and politicians to find a suitable location for winter encampment.² He sought to remain somewhat close to Philadelphia while also sufficiently distancing himself and his troops from the occupying British.

After extensive counsel, Washington narrowed the options down to Wilmington, Delaware; Lancaster, Pennsylvania; and Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Ultimately, General Washington settled on Valley Forge, a settlement 18 miles northwest of Philadelphia.³ This site possessed the advantages of high terrain to anticipate enemy attacks and proximity to the Schuylkill River, which ran directly downstream to Philadelphia.

On December 19, 1777, General Washington and 12,000 men traveled to the new encampment at Valley Forge. The soldiers arrived exhausted but optimistic; they knew that they had a long winter ahead, but they simultaneously realized that the American war effort had made substantial headway in the prior year. One of the first tasks for the troops at Valley Forge was to create living accommodations. Combating the biting winter air, Washington's men built log cabins as fast as they could manage, ultimately constructing approximately 1,500 cabins.⁴

Initially, the troops at Valley Forge enjoyed generally sufficient supplies to stave off hunger and the cold. However, as was the case for much of the war, the supplies for the American troops soon became lacking, due to both underfunding and the difficulty of transporting necessities to the remote encampment. In a letter to his stepson, General Washington wrote, "We are in a dreary kind of place, and uncomfortably provided."⁵

Men went, at times, days without proper food, and the situation regarding clothing was no better. General Washington would later describe "see[ing] men without Cloathes to cover their nakedness— without Blankets to lay on — without Shoes, by which their Marches might be traced by the Blood from their feet — and almost as often without Provisions as with."⁶ During one particularly bad stretch in March 1778, the Continental Army deemed 2,898 Valley Forge men unfit to serve due to lack of suitable clothing.⁷ Supplies did improve in the spring, however, after a five-member congressional delegation visited Valley Forge and witnessed the dire conditions.

The scarcity of food and clothing introduced illness to the encampment. The temporary barracks quickly grew unclean, allowing for outbreaks of scabies and body lice, the latter of which led to cases of typhus. The limited supply of water that did exist became contaminated, causing typhoid and dysentery. Other soldiers developed pneumonia and influenza. Horse carcasses often remained unburied, contributing to what General Washington termed a "smell [that] was in some places intolerable."⁸ Additionally, when General Washington learned of his men relieving themselves in locations detrimental to public health, he issued an order "to make Prisoner of any soldier who shall attempt to ease himself any where but at a proper necessary & five lashes are to be immediately ordered him."⁹

To prevent smallpox from taking hold, General Washington had ordered his troops to participate in an inoculation program in January 1777. Despite this command, thousands of Washington's men had opted to not undergo the procedure. When Washington learned of this disobedience, he managed to get the holdouts to partake in the program, which would later be described as "the first large-scale, state-sponsored immunization campaign in American history."¹⁰ Despite this and other efforts, approximately 2,000 soldiers died of disease at the six-month winter encampment.¹¹ No Continental Army camp location had a higher mortality rate than Valley Forge. In fact, the roughly one-in-six mortality rate at the Valley Forge encampment was higher than the mortality rates of many battles in the war.

Meanwhile, General Washington saw another problem arise: an external challenge to his leadership. While the men serving under Washington supported their commander in chief, some high-ranking military officials and congressional leaders began to doubt General Washington. Certain members of Congress, including Samuel Adams, Thomas Mifflin, and Richard Henry Lee, pushed through a proposal to create the Board of War to supervise General Washington. In October 1777, General Horatio Gates had secured a crucial American victory at the Battle of Saratoga. In response to this show of leadership, the Board of War named Gates its president in November 1777. At the same time, viewing General Gates as a stronger leader than General Washington, Major General Thomas Conway exchanged letters with Gates, in which the junior officer called Washington a "weak general." This "Conway Cabal," as it became known, came to a halt when the offending letter was leaked by a Washington ally, forcing Conway to resign in early 1778. Still, immense pressure remained on General Washington to silence his remaining critics by permitting no room for doubt as to his ability to lead men.¹²

In spite of these hardships and distractions, the resilience of the Continental Army allowed them to grow during this grueling winter. In February 1778, a Prussian general named Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben arrived at Valley Forge. Alternatively called "Baron von Steuben," the 47-year-old general had been involved in military service for over 30 years. Steuben brought his talents to America after a letter of introduction from Benjamin Franklin convinced the Continental Congress of the Baron's value and experience. Upon Steuben's arrival at Valley Forge, General Washington recognized the newcomer's expansive knowledge of military affairs and named him temporary inspector general.¹³

Immediately, Steuben took notice of the dearth of supplies and the squalid conditions of the camp. The Baron even quipped that "no European army could have held together in such circumstances."¹⁴ He then proceeded to train the Continental Army, relying on European drills and techniques.

While Steuben did not speak English, he would write his prescribed drills in French, at which point bilingual aides-de-camp, including future Founding Father Alexander Hamilton, would translate them to English.

The Baron grew immensely popular with the soldiers, as he worked closely with them in ways that other senior military leaders rarely did. Besides improving morale, Steuben's efforts — which lasted only a matter of months — produced a far more disciplined Continental Army. At the same time, Steuben authored *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*, a work that acted as the "blue book" for American military training until 1814.

Martha Washington, who joined her husband at his winter encampments each year during the war, also arrived at Valley Forge in February 1778. She served as her husband's advisor and confidant, ran the household of the general's headquarters, welcomed guests, and heightened morale. As Pierre Etienne Duponceau, secretary to Baron von Steuben, wrote, "In the midst of all our distress there were some bright sides of the picture which Valley Forge exhibited...Mrs. Washington had the courage to follow her husband to that dismal abode..."¹⁵

During the 1777-1778 winter, General Howe never moved on Valley Forge from occupied Philadelphia. As a result, the Americans were, when healthy, able to devote their time to training under the learned eye of Baron von Steuben. After a difficult winter, General Washington and his men emerged from Valley Forge on June 19, 1778, exactly six months after their arrival. Those that had survived the winter's adversity then marched on the British at the Battle of Monmouth, where the improved Continental Army held its own against a larger British force. The same Congress that had doubted Washington months earlier commended the commander in chief for "the important victory of Monmouth over the British grand army."¹⁶ Any lingering anti-Washington sentiments, such as those espoused in the episodic Conway Cabal and murmured in the halls of Congress, were forever put to bed.

The winter at Valley Forge tested General George Washington's resolve as a leader. He had to make do with scant supplies and face unrelenting disease. Against all odds, the fighting force he left the encampment with was, though smaller, far more prepared to defeat the British than it ever had been. Under the leadership of General Washington, the Continental Army would go on to force the surrender of British forces mere years later, granting America its independence.

Footnotes

1. <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/essays/british-occupation-of-philadelphia/#:~:text=Howe%20was%20responsible%20for%20the,line%20to%20the%20occupied%20city>
2. <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=%20Dates-From%3A1777-10-29&s=1111311111&r=4>
3. <https://www.nps.gov/vafo/learn/historyculture/valley-forge-history-and-significance.htm>
4. <https://www.nps.gov/vafo/learn/historyculture/valley-forge-history-and-significance.htm>
5. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0355>
6. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-14-02-0525>
7. <https://www.nps.gov/vafo/learn/historyculture/valley-forge-history-and-significance.htm>
8. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-14-02-0469>
9. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-14-02-0469>
10. https://books.google.com/books?id=EnauK2PI_9sC&q=the+first+large-scale%2C+state-sponsored+immunization+campaign+in+history#v=snippet&q=the%20first%20large-scale%2C%20state-sponsored%20immunization%20campaign%20in%20history&f=false
11. <https://www.nps.gov/vafo/learn/historyculture/valley-forge-history-and-significance.htm>
12. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/conway-cabal/>
13. <https://www.nps.gov/vafo/learn/historyculture/vonsteuben.htm>
14. <https://www.nps.gov/people/general-von-steuben.htm>
15. <https://www.nps.gov/vafo/learn/historyculture/valleyforgewomen.htm>
16. <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/ford-the-writings-of-george-washington-vol-vii-1778-1779?html=true>

Additional Resources

- <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/essays/british-occupation-of-philadelphia/#:~:text=Howe%20was%20responsible%20for%20the,lined%20to%20the%20occupied%20city.>
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- <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-13-02-0355>
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- <https://www.nps.gov/vafo/learn/historyculture/valley-forge-history-and-significance.htm>
- <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/conway-cabal/>
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- <https://www.nps.gov/people/general-von-steuben.htm>
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