

READING: THE WINTER AT VALLEY FORGE

After losing the battles of Brandywine and Germantown, General Washington led the Continental Army to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. There he established headquarters for the winter of 1777-1778. For several months, the discouraged American soldiers suffered greatly from a lack of food, clothing, and adequate housing.



The Continental Army at this time numbered about 11,000 men. They built crude log huts to try to protect themselves from the snow and cold. Farmers in the area preferred selling pigs, cattle, and grain to the British because American paper money was almost worthless. The British paid in gold and silver. Clothing became so scarce that some soldiers wore nothing but a cloth around their waist. Many had no shoes or blankets. The severe conditions took a heavy toll on the ragged army. More than 3,000 men died from sickness and malnutrition. Others decided to return home.

While these months were a nightmare for Washington's troops, the British army spent a comfortable winter in Philadelphia, about 25 miles to the east. Aided by Loyalists in the city, the British lived in warm houses, had plenty to eat, and had a good time attending parties and dances.

Valley Forge was the darkest hour of the Revolutionary War for the Continental Army. Yet the Americans emerged from their ordeal stronger and better organized than ever before. Washington did his best to boost the spirits of his most loyal followers. Baron von Steuben, a former Prussian officer, drilled the soldiers in a system of battlefield formations. By spring, the patriots were a disciplined, well-trained fighting force. Washington was further encouraged by the news that France and the United States had signed the Treaty of Alliance.

---

The reading selections that follow provide a glimpse of the problems faced by Washington and his men at Valley Forge.

Reading #1: From the journal of Private James Martin, describing conditions in the Continental Army as the soldiers marched to Valley Forge.

The army was now not only starved but naked; the greatest part were not only shirtless and barefoot, but destitute of all other clothing, especially blankets. I procured a small piece of raw cowhide and made myself a pair of moccasins, which kept my feet (while they lasted) from the frozen ground, although, as I well remember, the hard edges so galled my ankles, while on a march, that it was with much difficulty and pain that I could wear them afterwards; but the only alternative I had was to endure this inconvenience or to go barefoot, as hundreds of my companions had to, till they might be tracked by their blood upon the rough frozen ground. But hunger, nakedness and sore shins were not the only difficulties we had at that time to encounter; we had hard duty to perform and little or no strength to perform it with.

The army continued at and near the Gulf for some days, after which we marched for the Valley Forge in order to take up our winter-quarters. We were now in a truly forlorn condition -- no clothing, no provisions and as disheartened as need be. We arrived, however, at our destination a few days before Christmas. Our prospect was indeed dreary. In our miserable condition, to go into the wild woods and build us habitations to stay in, in such a weak, starved and naked condition, was appalling in the highest degree, especially to New Englanders, unaccustomed to such kind of hardships at home.

Reading #3: From the diary of Surgeon Albigeance Waldo, written shortly after his arrival at Valley Forge.

December 21. -- Preparations made for huts. Provisions scarce. Mr. Ellis went homeward -- sent a letter to my wife. Heartily wish myself at home. My skin and eyes are almost spoiled with continual smoke. A general cry thro' the camp this evening among the soldiers, "No meat! No Meat!" The distant vales echoed back the melancholy sound -- "No meat! No meat!" What have you for your dinners, boys? "Nothing but fire cake and water, Sir." At night: "Gentlemen, the supper is ready." What is your supper, lads? "Fire cake and water, Sir."

Very poor beef has been drawn in our camp the greater part of this season. A butcher bringing a quarter of this kind of beef into camp one day who had white buttons on the knees of his breeches, a soldier cries out: "There, there, Tom, is some more of your fat beef. But my soul I can see the butcher's breeches buttons through it."

December 22. -- Lay excessive cold and uncomfortable last night. My eyes are started out from their orbits like a rabbit's eyes, occasioned by a great cold and smoke.

What have you got for breakfast, lads? "Fire cake and water, Sir." The Lord send that our Commissary of Purchases may live on fire cake and water till their gluttoned guts are turned to pasteboard.

Our division are under marching orders this morning. I am ashamed to say it, but I am tempted to steal fowls if I could find them, or even a whole hog, for I feel as if I could eat one. But the impoverished country about us affords but little matter to employ a thief, or keep a clever fellow in good humour. But why do I talk of hunger and hard usage, when so many in the world have not even fire cake and water to eat?

Reading #4: From the journal of Chevalier de Pontgibaud, a French volunteer who joined the Continental Army at Valley Forge.

Soon I came in sight of the camp. My imagination had pictured an army with uniforms, the glitter of arms, standards, etc., in short, military pomp of all sorts. Instead of the imposing spectacle I expected, I saw, grouped together or standing alone, militiamen, poorly clad, and for the most part without shoes -- many of them badly armed.

Assignment: Pretend that you are a soldier in the Continental Army encamped at Valley Forge. It is now May, 1778. The army is preparing to leave Valley Forge and renew hostilities with the British. You have decided to write a letter to friends back home telling them about your experiences at the camp. Be sure to mention:

1. A description of the suffering that you have endured.
2. Your feelings toward those soldiers who decided to leave camp and go home.
3. Your reason for remaining at Valley Forge, instead of going home with the others.
4. An opinion about the character and leadership qualities of General George Washington, and your reaction to the fact that some members of the Continental Congress want to replace Washington with General Horatio Gates.
5. Your attitude toward the Loyalists who have helped the British army spend a comfortable winter in Philadelphia.
6. Feelings about Baron von Steuben and the military drills that he has put you through.
7. Your reaction to France and the United States signing the Treaty of Alliance.
8. Your opinion of the chances of the Continental Army winning the Revolutionary War.