

# The impact of valley forge on the american revolution

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



Nothing can be more hurtful to the service, than the neglect of discipline; for that discipline, more than numbers, gives one army the superiority over another” 1. These words were spoken by the famous General George Washington, never could have rang truer than during the winter of 1777-1788 in American history. The encampment at Valley Forge in the colony of Pennsylvania had a monumental impact on the fight for American independence. Three major forces emerged during Valley Forge: (1) the leadership of George Washington, (2) the success of the smallpox inoculation, and (3) the improved military tactics taught to the troops.

When history experts hear the words “ Valley Forge” they usually reflect upon the harsh conditions our fighting men endured during that fateful winter of 1777-1778 in the midst of the Revolutionary War. The outcome of that struggle is what is often referred to as the birthplace of the American Army. We famously are acquainted with George Washington as our first president of the newly formed United States of America.

Prior to his presidency, George Washington was chosen as the commander of the Continental Army on June 14, 1775, during the Revolutionary War. Preceding his appointment, Washington had never before commanded a large army in the field. After his appointment, George Washington won only three of the nine major battles that he oversaw and was often seen retreating from battle. Before his encampment at Valley Forge, Washington’s Continental Army suffered defeat at the Battle of White Plains and later at Fort Mifflin in New York during November, 1776.

Chased from New York, Washington sought a place for his troops to retreat and recover. Times were extremely bleak and disheartening to Washington and his men; so much so that Thomas Paine penned his famous quote during this time: " These are the times that try men's souls...the summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now deserves the love and thanks of man and woman" 2. George Washington had several options after his defeats in New York.

He could have complained and blamed others for defeat or simply could have quit his post as a leader of the army, trying to procure independence for our newly formed colonies. Many in higher leadership were ready to dispose of Washington as a leader and replace him with Major Horatio Gates who had just been the hero at the Battle of Saratoga. George Washington chose to strive for excellence and continued to lead his troops. Thus retreating to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania for the winter of 1777-1778. The location of Valley Forge was strategically chosen because it would allow the American soldiers to challenge the British control of the countryside around Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Further, General Washington was also looking for a safe location for his weary troops that numbered approximately twelve-thousand and were in need of respite and recovery. He also allowed nearly 500 women and children to accompany the troops. Martha Washington, George's wife, was even allowed at the camp. The admittance of women and children were a motivation factor for the troops. Valley Forge would be an optimal place for

renewal and readiness to fight. With little food and proper clothing, the troops built wooden huts and searched the countryside for straw because of the inadequate amount of blankets for all that were housed there.

Nearly one-third of those in the camp reportedly did not have shoes and their bloody footprints could be seen in the snow as they marched. Washington threatened lashings and death by shooting anyone who tried deserting the camp. For those soldiers that stood by him, he expressed deep gratitude and supported them with the best of his abilities. Washington's tough-as-nails approach to training his soldiers helped the revolution obtain mental unbreakable and physical rugged soldiers.

Many soldiers marched shoeless with bloody feet in the snow during that fabled winter. George Washington never gave up, and added several fine men of leadership to his group. As Wayne K. Bodle writes in *The Valley Forge Winter: Civilians and Soldiers in War*, after their six months of training in the mud and snow of Valley Forge, Washington's troops became imbued with "a deeper identification with and pride in their craft."

Destruction to the Continental Army was caused at first by Smallpox.

Smallpox... death, destruction, infection, and pandemic; these are various words that people associate with the deadly disease caused by the variola virus" 4, smallpox. This disease has been a scourge against humanity for centuries, dating back as far as the third century AD. This disease inflicted massive destruction and killed thousands of soldiers in the Continental Army

during the Revolutionary War. Throughout the Revolutionary War, smallpox killed an estimated sixty-three-thousand soldiers during the conflict<sup>5</sup>.

During the 16th century, European explorers introduced the smallpox disease to America. It is thought that George Washington lost more of his troops to disease than to casualties in combat. It was such a devastation that John Adams wrote to his wife Abigail in 1777 that “ for every soldier killed in battle, disease killed ten” <sup>6</sup>. Even Washington fell victim to the disease at age 19 while traveling in Barbados in 1751. His case was thought to be a mild one with just some scarring on the nose<sup>7</sup>. During Washington’s life, Smallpox was one of the most feared diseases of the century and at its peak, it spread like wildfire through the Continental Army.

The disease threatened to be the downfall of the Continental Army and thus cause the colonies to lose their fight for independence from Great Britain. During the Revolutionary War, Continental soldiers were far more likely to “ succumb to disease than to the bullets or bayonets of their foes” <sup>8</sup>. During the early revolutionary period, smallpox broke out in-mass because of non-ideal living conditions. People were crowded into cities under besiegement, military encampments were packed full with men living in close quarters, and fleeing citizens and traveling soldiers would often transmit the disease unwittingly and faster than if the colonies were in peacetime.

This was in large part due to the “ two week incubation” of the disease before symptoms appeared, so those who were carrying the germ “ continued to spread the disease as they travel[ed]” <sup>9</sup>. Additionally, colonists

were at a higher risk of contracting smallpox than the British, because “ they had been exposed to it far less” 10. Moreover, many American colonists suspected their personal enemies and the British of trying to wage a “ germ warfare by deliberately infecting the civilian population” 11. Like most communicable disease, smallpox was most often found in highly concentrated, centers of large populations, Philadelphia in particular: “ Several [former] members of the Continental Congress contracted the disease during their tenure in the City of Brotherly Love” 12.

As a result, George Washington’s leadership led to the decline of smallpox in the Continental Army and the eventual win of the Continental forces over the almighty British empire. During the winter at Valley Forge in 1777 through 1778, George Washington’s dream to inoculate the entire army and to help eradicate smallpox within the army was in distress. Soldiers at Valley Forge, who were long-term enlistments, to Washington's surprise, “ still included susceptible men who had somehow escaped smallpox inoculations”

13. The number of these men were between three and four thousand. As a result, the men at Valley Forge were inoculated throughout the harshest winter endured in the Revolutionary War. In Washington’s view, it was paramount that these men were inoculated “ with all possible secrecy” 14 to avoid tipping off the ever-growing British army presence in nearby Philadelphia. At the conclusion of this inoculation period, most of the men were tolerant and resistant to Smallpox, like the rest of the Continental Army, and able to help the American colonists win their freedom. Smallpox, the plague of the colonies during the revolutionary period, the silent killer

that threatened to dismantle the American Revolution. Without George Washington's leadership, ingenuity, and courageousness in fighting this ghastly disease, the colonies would have likely lost to the British empire and never acquired the power to determine their own destiny.

Military tactics prior to Valley Forge during the American Revolution are commonly remembered as soldiers standing in straight lines with bayonets fixed for attack. The troops would advance 50 to 100 yards from the enemy, fire and then charge with bayonets. By standing shoulder to shoulder in straight lines with no protection, many men were hit frequently. George Washington had the forethought to bring leadership help into Valley Forge by the means of Prussian military officer, Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben who set standards for the camp layout and troops. The Baron spoke no English but the knowledge he imparted through interpreters on the troops was invaluable.

He trained the troops in Prussian-style drills such as marching in rows of four instead of one straight line and efficiently load, fire and reload weapons. Steuben also wrote training manuals. George Washington was so impressed with von Steuben that he named him Inspector General. He set standards high and the troops had to progress through certain regiments in order to fight in battles. Von Steuben also taught the troops how to more efficiently attack with bayonets.

He even wrote a "blue book" on the new tactics for fighting; demonstrating what a success that manual was, it was used by the United States Army until

181415. New troops emerged in June of 1778. Even though Washington lacked tactical knowledge, he was known as a great uniter of the troops. His critics were proven wrong after they saw the well-trained and ready for action men that he had led through the horrible winter of 1777-1778.

In summation, “ Perseverance and spirit have done wonders in all ages” 16. These words were likely George Washington’s motto to his soldiers at Valley Forge in that dreadfully fabled winter of 1777 through 1778. The perseverance shown by George Washington in these unfathomably, bleak times helped the soldiers at Valley Forge and throughout the Continental Army survive through the unfavorable winter and defeat the British juggernaut.

Moreover, the perseverance in the quest to inoculate all of the Continental Army of Smallpox paid immense dividends, by allowing the soldiers to be strong enough to withstand the advances of the British Redcoats and strike them down and win independence. Finally, the colonists’ perseverance throughout the early portions of the Revolutionary War, in which they were being battered handily by the British, lead to improved military tactics. These tactics helped to teach discipline and many other valuable skills that assisted them win the war for freedom.

#### Notes

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