American Revolution  Valley Forge

Valley Forge was where the American Continental Army made camp during the winter of 1777-1778. It was here that the American forces became a true fighting unit. Valley Forge is often called the birthplace of the American Army.

Where is Valley Forge?

Valley Forge is located in the southeastern corner of Pennsylvania around 25 miles northwest of Philadelphia.

Why did they camp there?

George Washington chose to make the winter camp at Valley Forge for several reasons. First, it was close to Philadelphia where the British were camping for the winter. He could keep an eye on the British and protect the people of Pennsylvania. At the same time it was far enough from the British so that he would have plenty of warning if they decided to attack.

Valley Forge was also a good place to defend if the army was attacked. There were high areas in Mount Joy and Mount Misery to make fortifications. There also was a river, the Schuylkill River, that served as a barrier to the north.

Who were the American leaders?

It was at Valley Forge where the Continental Army turned into a trained fighting force. There were three leaders in particular who played a key role in building the army.

General George Washington - George Washington was the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army during the American Revolution. His leadership and resolve played a big part in the United States gaining its independence from Britain. General Friedrich von Steuben - Friedrich von Steuben was a Prussian born military leader who served as the inspector general under Washington. He took on the task of training the Continental Army. It was through von Steuben's daily drills, even in the cold of winter at Valley Forge, that the soldiers of the Continental Army learned the tactics and discipline of a true fighting force.
General Marquis de Lafayette – Marquis de Lafayette was a French military leader who joined Washington's staff at Valley Forge. He worked for no pay and didn't ask for special quarters or treatment. Lafayette would later become an important commander at several key battles.

Were the conditions bad?

The conditions that the soldiers had to endure at Valley Forge were horrible. They had to deal with cold, wet, and snowy weather. They were often hungry, as food was scarce.

Many of the soldiers didn't have warm clothing or even shoes as their shoes had worn out on the long march to the valley. There were few blankets as well.

Living in cold, damp, and crowded log cabins made matters even worse because it allowed disease and sickness to spread quickly throughout the camp. Diseases such as typhoid fever, pneumonia, and smallpox took the lives of many soldiers. Of the 10,000 men who began the winter at Valley Forge, around 2,500 died before the spring.

Interesting Facts About the Valley Forge

Valley Forge was the first state park in Pennsylvania. Today it is known as the Valley Forge National Historic Park. The area was named after an iron forge located at nearby Valley Creek. General Friedrich von Steuben wrote the Revolutionary War Drill Manual which became the standard drill manual used by the US forces up until the War of 1812.

It is thought that only around 1/3 of the men who arrived in Valley Forge had shoes. Some families of the soldiers including wives, sisters, and children made camp near the soldiers and helped them survive the winter. They were called Camp Followers. General von Steuben arrived at Valley Forge with a letter of recommendation from Benjamin Franklin. His energy and knowledge of training and drilling men made an immediate impact on the soldiers at the camp.

Martha Washington stayed at the camp as well. She would bring baskets of food and socks to the soldiers who needed them the most.

Works Cited History >> American Revolution