

ONE

Bloody Footprints in the Snow



PRIVATE JOSEPH PLUMB MARTIN leaned into the icy wind, pushed one sore and aching foot ahead of the other, and kept on marching. With 11,000 other weary soldiers, he was trudging up the Gulph Road, a rutted dirt path that would lead them to a place called the Valley Forge, where the Continental army was to take up winter quarters.

For the past week they had marched through the wintry Pennsylvania countryside in snow, sleet, and freezing rain, toting muskets, knapsacks, and canteens, shivering in the bitter cold, their empty bellies growling and protesting in hunger. They lacked warm clothing and blankets, and they slogged along the road in shoes that were falling apart. When their shoes did give way, the men continued to march on bare, bleeding feet. A division commander reported to General George Washington that half his men were “walking barefooted on the ice or frozen ground.”

That’s how Private Martin would remember the march years later. “The army was not only starved but naked,” he wrote. “The greatest part were not only shirtless and bare-foot, but destitute of all other clothing, especially blankets.”

When Martin's own shoes gave out, he found a chunk of raw cowhide and made himself 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. 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."

Martin had just turned seventeen and was already a battle-tested veteran. A husky Connecticut farm boy, he was only fifteen when he went to town with some friends and enlisted in the Continental army in June 1776. The Revolutionary War had broken out the year before, when British troops and Massachusetts minutemen fired on each other at Lexington and Concord.

Young Martin had watched enviously as older boys joined up and marched off to the war. He was eager "to call myself and be called a soldier. . . . I [had] collected pretty correct ideas of the contest between this country [America] and the mother country [Britain]. I thought I was as warm a patriot as the best of them. . . . I felt more anxious than ever to be called a defender of my country." So at fifteen, Martin realized his ambition and became a soldier.

It took General George Washington's suffering army, with its horses, cannons, wagons, baggage, and equipment, a whole week to cover the thirteen miles from their temporary encampment at White Marsh to their winter quarters at the Valley Forge. When they arrived on the evening of December 19, 1777, the place seemed desolate, even haunted—"this wooded wilderness," one officer called it, "the soil thin, uncultivated, and almost uninhabited, without forage and without provisions."

The campsite was a densely wooded plateau about two miles long, bordered by steep hillsides and the swift-flowing Schuylkill River, which served as natural fortifications. Scattered about were a few small houses and some patches of deserted farmland. The whole area had been stripped of food and forage by the British, who had destroyed the old iron forge on Valley Creek that gave the place its name.

Washington had chosen the site because it offered plenty of timber with which to build wooden huts for the winter and because it could be readily defended against an enemy assault. It was also reasonably close—about twenty miles—to Philadelphia, the proud capital of the rebellious American colonies and America’s largest city, which had been captured by the British three months earlier. As the American troops at Valley Forge, half-starved, thirsty, and numb with fatigue, pitched their ragged tents and huddled for warmth beside sputtering campfires, the British occupiers of Philadelphia were eating heartily in the city’s numerous taverns and sleeping comfortably in billowy feather beds.

Washington’s fellow generals had argued sharply over the selection of winter quarters. It was vital that the army remain close enough to the capital to keep an eye on the enemy and, if opportunity arose, to retake the city from the British. When his officers couldn’t agree on a site, Washington chose Valley Forge as the best available compromise. It seemed “a dreary kind of place and uncomfortably provided,” the American commander admitted, but he told his soldiers that he himself “would share in the hardship and partake of every inconvenience.”



Another view by Darley of the troops trudging up the Gulph Road to Valley Forge.

Major General Johann de Kalb, a volunteer from France, was one of the staff officers who disagreed with Washington's choice of a winter campsite. "The idea of wintering in this desert can only have been put into the head of the commanding general by an interested [land] speculator or a disaffected man," he told a friend. "I am satisfied that our present position, if retained, will offer none of the advantages expected of it. On the contrary, the army will be kept in continual alarms from being too near the enemy."

By the time Private Martin's company reached the campsite, it was dark and cold. They had "not a morsel of anything to eat. . . . We were now in a truly forlorn condition—no clothing, no provisions and as disheartened as need be."

Martin was not only hungry; he was "perishing with thirst." He searched for water "till I was weary and came to my tent without finding any." In the darkness, he didn't realize that Valley Creek, which had powered the iron forge destroyed by the British, was just a half mile away. And while there was snow on the ground, it was too thin to scoop up and melt for drinking.

"Fatigue and thirst, joined with hunger, almost made me desperate," Martin recalled. "I felt at that instant as if I would have taken victuals and drink from the best friend I had on earth by force. I am not writing fiction, all are sober realities."

As Martin returned to his tent he spotted two soldiers he didn't know swigging from their canteens. "They told me they had found [water] a good distance off, but could not direct me to the place as it was very dark."

Martin asked for a drink. The soldiers refused, unwilling to share their precious water. But Martin persisted. Finally he persuaded them to sell him a drink "for three pence Pennsylvania currency, which was every cent of property I could then call my own."

General Washington arrived at the campsite the next morning. Rather than move into one of the nearby farmhouses, he pitched his big marquee tent for himself and his aides, as if to show his men that he stood by his word and would share their hardships. Not until most of his troops had some shelter of their own would he move out of the



When they finally reached the campground, the troops huddled around hastily built fires. *Engraving after Darley.*

tent and into a stone house on the encampment grounds. Some of his ranking generals felt no such obligation and immediately took over civilian houses in the vicinity, some as many as three miles from the encampment.

Later that winter, Washington's wife, Martha, joined him at Valley Forge. She was clearly worried about her husband's state of mind. "The General is well, but much worn with fatigue and anxiety," she confided to a friend. "I never knew him to be so anxious as now."

*Bloody Footprints
in the Snow*