

# Conditions at Valley Forge

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## Summary

Washington's Continental Army suffered through horrid conditions during the winter of 1777-1778 at the encampment at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Food was inadequate, shelter was insufficient, and soldiers lacked desperately needed winter clothing. Survival of the army was in jeopardy.

## Objectives

Students will:

- 1.) describe the conditions that the soldiers experience while camped at Valley Forge;
- 2.) utilize primary source materials.

## U.S. History Event or Era

American Revolution

## Grade Level

This lesson can be implemented into the middle school classroom (grade 8).

## Materials

Handouts containing primary source material from Valley Forge and drawings of the soldiers at Valley Forge.

## Lesson Time

This lesson will take two class periods of 45 minutes to complete.

## Lesson Procedures

- 1.) Part A: Students will read and analyze the primary source materials and the drawings and answer the questions that accompany the readings and drawings.
- 2.) Part B: Students will write an essay analyzing the conditions and Valley Forge.

Washington's Continental Army spent the winter of 1777-1778 at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. There the soldiers endured horrible conditions. Yet, the army managed to survive and resumed fighting the next spring. This assignment examines the experiences of the soldiers at Valley Forge.

### Part A:

The experiences of the soldiers at Valley Forge were critical for the Continental Army. Read the following sections by people who were at Valley Forge. After reading the documents and analyzing the pictures, answer the following questions about each document and picture.

#### Washington's Letter to Governor George Clinton

To Governor George Clinton  
Head Quarters, Valley Forge, February 16, 1778

Dear Sir: ... I mean the present dreadful situation of the army for want of provisions, and the miserable prospects before us, ... For some days past, there has been little less, than a famine in camp. A part of the army has been a week, without any kind of flesh, and the rest for three or four days. Naked and starving as they are, we cannot enough admire the incomparable patience and fidelity of the soldiery, that they have not been ere this excited by their sufferings, to a general mutiny or dispersion.

... I am, on my part, putting every engine to work, that I can possibly think of, to prevent the fatal consequences, we have so great a reason to apprehend. I am calling upon all those, whose stations and influence enable them to contribute their aid upons so important an occasion; and from your well known zeal, I expect every thing within the compass of your power, and that the abilities and resources of the state over which you preside, will admit. I am sensible of the disadvantages it labours under, from having been so long the scene of war, and that it must be exceedingly drained by the great demands to which it has been subject. But, tho' you may not be able to contribute materially to our relief, you can perhaps do something towards it; and any assistance, however trifling in itself, will be of great moment at so critical a juncture, and will conduce to keeping the army together till the Commissary's department can be put upon a better footing, and effectual measures concerted to secure a permanent and competent supply. What methods you can take, you will be the best judge of; but, if you can devise any means to procure a quantity of cattle, or other kind of flesh, for the use of this army, to be at camp in the course of a month, you will render a most essential service to the common cause. I have the honor etc.

1. According to Washington, what is the condition of the army?
2. Why does Washington admire the soldiers in the army?
3. What steps has Washington taken to improve the situation of the army?
4. What does Washington hope George Clinton will be able to do for the army?

#### Washington's General Orders of December 18, 1777

Washington instructs the troops how to build their huts:

"The Soldier's huts are to be of the following dimensions, viz: fourteen by sixteen each, sides, ends and roofs made with logs, and the roof made tight with split slabs, or in some other way; the sides made tight with clay, fireplace made of wood and secured with clay on the inside eighteen inches thick, this fireplace to be in the rear of the hut; the door to be in the end next the street; the doors to be made of split oak slabs, unless boards can be procured. Side-walls to be six and a half feet high. The officers huts to form a line in the rear of the troops, one hut to be allowed for each General Officer, one to the Staff of each brigade, one to the field officers of each regiment, one to the commissioned officers of two companies, and one to every twelve non-commissioned officers and soldiers."

1. According to Washington, how large were the huts supposed to be?

2. What was the building material to be used in the huts?
  
3. How many soldiers were to live in each hut?
  
4. What problems do you think the soldiers faced when building the huts?

Jonathan Todd, a surgeon's mate

He wrote to his father and described his hut. The reality of the huts was to always according to Washington's plan.

Christmas Day, 1777

"We have but one Dull ax to build a Logg Hutt, When it be done knows not."

January 19, 1778

"I will give you a description of our hutt which is built Nearly after the same Model of the Others- it is 18 Feet Long & 16 broad two rooms and two chimneys at opposite Corners of the house – the Floor is made of split Loggs as is the Partition & Door- the Whole of it was made with one Poor ax and not another Tool- we were not more than a fortnight in making it although Never more that three men Work'd at once – the Roof is not the best in Wet weather oak slabs Cover with Turf & Earth – Our Inards work is not yet Completed."

1. How did Todd's hut differ from Washington's design?
  
2. Why was this hut so hard to build?
  
3. What were the weaknesses of the hut?
  
4. A fortnight is a period of two weeks. Why did it take so long to build the hut?

Lieutenant WILLIAM BARTON of the Fourth and later the First New Jersey Regiment;  
To his father, Gilbert Barton of Allentown, N.J.,

..."Camp Valley Forge, Feb. 18th 1778...I should wrote oftener but have been in expectation of Coming home but this day find my expectations blasted, and have no maner of hope to get home Untill April...I have Received my Coat & boots by Capt. Weycoff and am Inform'd you have procured me some shirts which I am Extremely Glad of as I shall be in Great need of them in a short time. I'me at this Present time in health, and hope these may find you all in Perfect health, if to the reverse at any time Please to give me inteligence Thireof and I shall come home at all Events. I have not Receiv'd a Letter from you since at home, should be very Glad to be favour'd with a few lines if Convenient and Likewise a few pounds of Sugar and A little Chocolate...there is a Scarcety of those articles in this Place...Camp does not very well agree with me..."  
Just six days later Barton's friend Lt. John Blair of the 3rd New Jersey wrote for him, Barton being in dire straits according to Blair. "

Valley Forge 24th Febry. 1778...By request of your Son Wm. Barton I embrace the oportunity of Informing that he is very unwell these ten Days and no appearance of getting any better, and is very Desirous that you would send a Wagon or Cheare for him as he is too weak to Ride a horseback, he likewise begs that you would appeal to Colo. Brearely to Write to Major Cumming to give him leave to go home as Genl. Orders is very strict against any Officer ever leaving Camp. Mr. Willm. Desires his Love to you & his Mother & Sisters..."

1. What luxury items does Lieutenant Barton request that his family send him?

2. What items had he received from home?
3. How had circumstances changed between February 18<sup>th</sup> and February 24<sup>th</sup>?
4. What help does Barton request from his parents?

From the Diary of Albigenice Waldo,  
Surgeon at Valley Forge, 1777.

December 21

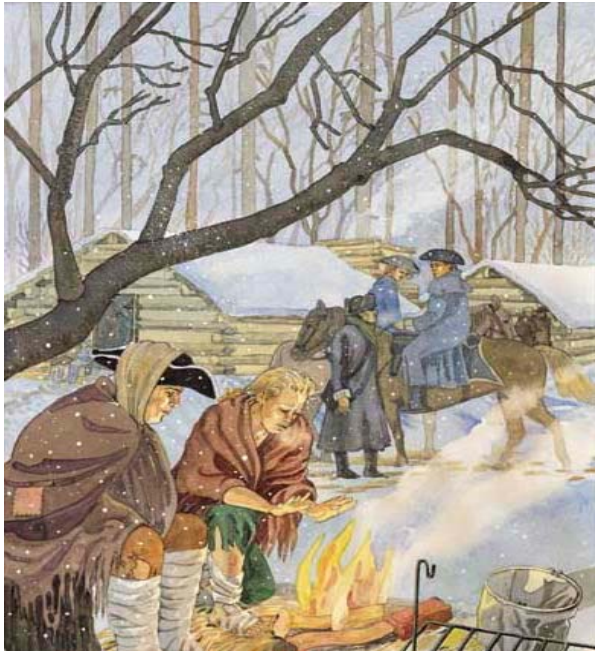
[Valley Forge.] Preparations are made for huts. Provisions Scarce. Mr. Ellis went homeward - sent a Letter to my Wife. Heartily wish myself at home, my Skin and eyes are almost spoil'd with continual smoke. A general cry thro' the Camp this Evening among the Soldiers, "No Meat! No Meat!" - the Distant vales Echo'd back the melancholy sound - "No Meat! No Meat!" Immitating the noise of Crows and Owls, also, made a part of confused Musick.

What have you for your dinner 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, by my soul I can see the Butcher's breeches buttons through it."

(fire cake is a mixture of flour and water baked on a stone which is place in the coals of the fire)

1. What is the cry that goes throughout the encampment?
2. What is the problem with Waldo's skin and eyes?
3. What are the soldiers forced to eat?

Look at the drawings of Valley Forge and answer the questions.



1. Describe the conditions the soldiers are experiencing.
2. List the ways the soldiers in the pictures are unprepared for the cold weather.
3. Look carefully at the pictures. Which people do you think are officers?  
What made you think those were the officers?

### Conditions at Valley Forge

**Part B: Essay**

Using the documents in Part A, the answers to the questions in Part A, and your knowledge of the American Revolution, write a well organized essay that describes the hardships that the Continental soldiers experienced at Valley Forge. Use evidence from the documents to support your descriptions.