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VALLEY FORGE
HISTORICAL RESEARCH
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SUMMARY REPORT

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Valley Forge National Historical Park

July, 1980

SUMMARY REPORT

VALLEY FORGE HISTORICAL RESEARCH PROJECT

OBJECTIVES AND INCEPTION

The Valley Forge Historical Research Project was initiated by the National Park Service in order to provide the most complete and accurate data base for the management and interpretation of Valley Forge, created a National Historical Park by law on July 4, 1976.

In August, 1977, five research historians began to collect a comprehensive file of primary documentary material to elucidate the history of the encampment and the physical elements which existed during its tenure. As evidence began to accumulate, a variety of questions asserted themselves. In the autumn of 1978, historians Wayne Bodle and Jacqueline Thibaut set about sifting through the evidence to transform it into written reports, addressing themselves to the following queries: how did Valley Forge fit into the history of the Revolution, and what was its provable historical significance? What was the nature of the Continental army organization during this period, and how did it change? How did the army intersect with the civilian population of southeastern Pennsylvania and the British army occupying Philadelphia? What were the military objectives entertained by Washington and Congress over the winter? What was the nature of the physical community of structures, features, and objects at Valley Forge? How important were political considerations in the administration of the army? Did the army suffer privations as severe as traditionally recorded, and if so, why? Finally, how was the Valley Forge encampment a reflection of the larger cultural matrix of eighteenth century North America?

The task of attempting answers for these inquiries has without exception engendered responses which serve to substantially enliven the history of the American Revolution.

VOLUME I - THE VORTEX OF SMALL FORTUNES: THE CONTINENTAL ARMY AT
VALLEY FORGE, 1777-1778

by Wayne K. Bodle

Mr. Wayne K. Bodle has broken new ground with his observations on the changeable nature of army morale at Valley Forge, Washington's political acumen, the definition and realization of military objectives, relations between civilians and the military, and the compositional fluctuation in what he analogically terms the "metabolism" of the army. The many subjects he develops relate not only to the discrete entity of the army at Valley Forge, but also to the larger issues of the social history of the Revolution and the intricacies of Revolutionary politics. He has sought not only to describe how a host of actors behaved on the historical scene, but also to analyze the motives which governed their actions.

Chapter I - Campaign for Pennsylvania

The author traces the military and political developments of the summer and autumn from the arrival of the Continental army in Pennsylvania at the end of July, 1777, through the Whitemarsh encampment of November and December. This prelude to the specific history of the encampment dissects the complex military movements, political determinants and material deficiencies which resulted in the decision to place the army at Valley Forge. Mr. Bodle arrives at some unexpected conclusions concerning the state of the army's morale during this period of arduous campaigning and vacillating expectations. It has, for instance, been repeatedly asserted that in choosing Valley Forge as the location for a winter encampment, Washington simply bowed to the demands of the state of Pennsylvania, as represented in Congress. The complexity of the process whereby the decision was made to move to Valley Forge refutes this

conclusion. The site was chosen as a result of a compromise which involved a convergence of military and political determinants and a reconciliation, by Washington, of the diverse opinions of his generals and of Congress. The state of Pennsylvania did not place its demands on paper until the army had moved from the Gulph to Valley Forge on December 19, 1777.

Chapter II - "Starve, Dissolve, or Disperse"

With the Continental army in situ at Valley Forge, the wages of the late autumnal campaigning caught up with the army. In late December, the troops endured the first of the severe supply shortages of the winter. Washington, however, was still developing elaborate plans, which he intended to enact should the opportunity arise, for a movement against detached segments of Sir William Howe's army. Concurrently, however, he was constrained to assault Congress with ominous warnings concerning the army's wholly inadequate system of supply. In his letters to Congress Washington displayed a somber rhetorical brilliance, his dark-hued reflections shot through with phrases which sharply evoked the plight of the common soldier. Washington had honed to a fine cutting edge his ability to transfix his reader, and it became his most effective weapon as principal advocate for the army.

Chapter III - "Trublesum Times for us All but Wors for the Solders"

In January, as the army settled down to a semblance of routine, the patterns of camp life were established for the winter. Officers became preoccupied with a welter of disputes over rank and promotion, and with the vaulting ambition of the much-despised General Thomas Conway. Regional prejudices erupted vituperatively in correspondence, as New Englanders heaped censure on what one of them called the "sanctified Quaking State."

As clothing wore out and failed to be replaced, officers penned pleas to their states to alleviate the shortages. In defining this period, Mr. Bodle likens the army's sphere of influence to a crescent, centered with its greatest width at Valley Forge, and its tapering ends at Trenton and Wilmington. Detachments were charged with reducing British depredations in Chester, Philadelphia, and Bucks counties. Washington, however, was only able to exert token control in many areas, and he was compelled by insufficient numbers to abandon almost entirely the regions east of the Schuylkill to the erratically effective presence of the Pennsylvania militia.

Chapter IV - "The Stone which the Builders have Rejected"

Congress launched, at Washington's request, a Committee of Conference consisting of seven of its own members to confer with Washington and his generals on the matter of a new organization for the army. The committee arrived at Moore Hall near camp in late January, and their sphere of concerns, at Washington's insistence, became much broader than originally intended. The importance of this committee's influence in offsetting the bid for administrative control of the army made by the Board of War, and in helping to bolster Washington's teetering political fortunes, can hardly be overemphasized. Through his frequent meetings with the members of the committee, Washington impressed upon them the importance of the plan he favored for reorganization of the army, successfully advanced Major General Nathanael Greene as the new Quarter Master General, and generally garnered their trust and esteem. The committee, fortuitously present at camp during the most severe provision shortage of the winter, alerted its parent body to the magnitude of the disorganization in the supply and transport services.

Chapter V - "The Lord's Time to Work"

By mid-February, the survival of the army as a concentrated entity was in grave jeopardy. The Commissary Department failed to supply the regiments with the meat ration for a period ranging from three days to over a week, depending on the unit. Illness in the ranks and resignation by officers proliferated. Mutiny was narrowly avoided by emergency foraging expeditions in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, which collected sufficient grain and livestock to sustain the army until the flagging Commissary revived. Washington was constrained to relinquish entirely any control over territory east of the Schuylkill. Provisions from farmers enamored with British specie flowed almost unchecked into the occupied capital. Washington was eventually compelled to bolster the Pennsylvania militia with small contingents of infantry and mounted troops. During February, his stated objective of protecting the country from British incursions was accorded little success.

Chapter VI - "The Chapter of Experiments"

March opened with torrential rains, encumbering Nathanael Greene's strenuous initiative to revive the moribund Quarter Master's Department. His reluctant assumption of office freed Washington, who turned his attention to preparations for the spring campaign. With a host of correspondence, he besieged the state and Continental authorities for recruits, clothing, and equipage. British troop transfers by water quickened the fear that Howe would open the campaign early, with the main army ill-prepared and immobile for want of horses and wagons. New imperatives emanating from global strategy, however, began to shift the British ministry's prosecution of the war toward a more defensive posture in North America. Washington continued unabated his calculated assault on Congress and state officials, with the object of seeing

the army adequately augmented and supplied. Congress debated endlessly the proposals for the new organization of the army and the officers' pension scheme, the latter being of considerable moment to the morale of the officer corps. The army was reschooled in a simplified drill and in maneuvers by von Steuben, who taught them for the first time a uniform manual of arms. In the face of uncertainty concerning the British intentions, efforts to secure the camp with extensive field fortifications were redoubled. The fluctuating influence exerted by both armies on the intervening civilian population erupted in small frays as the armies became more restive with the onset of spring. Violence between British armed loyalists and patriots flared in southern New Jersey. The British, however, failed to incite a loyalist insurgency in Bucks County, where consolidated British control would have critically jeopardized the Continental army's vital supply link with New England.

Chapter VII - "As the fine Season Approaches"

The morale of the army was enlivened at the beginning of May by the news of the conclusion of a treaty of alliance with France. Congress, despite Washington's adjurations of haste, debated exhaustively the plan for the reformation of the army, which was not approved until the first week in June. Washington called a major council of war to establish a plan for the renewal of active operations, and the council produced a consensus of a highly conservative nature, recommending that the army remain in a defensive posture. The pace of training and supply accelerated, as new recruits arrived and military equipage continued to hurtle toward the stores near camp. On June 10, still anxiously awaiting confirmation of British intentions to evacuate the city, Washington ordered the men out of their huts and into tents at a distance from camp, to remove them from the fetid environs and to toughen

them for the imminent march. Following the council of war, Washington had determined on a more aggressive undertaking. With the British army's evacuation of Philadelphia on June 18, a renewed and respectably supplied Main Army set out toward Coryell's Ferry on the Delaware, and toward their collision with the British at Monmouth, in New Jersey.

VOLUME II - THIS FATAL CRISIS: LOGISTICS, SUPPLY, AND THE CONTINENTAL
ARMY AT VALLEY FORCE, 1777-1778

by Jacqueline Thibaut

If the support services had functioned adequately throughout the winter, Valley Forge would never have developed its reputation for harrowing deprivation. A deficiency of foresight and experience beset nearly all of the principal administrators of the support services in late 1777. To Quarter Master General Thomas Mifflin, Commissary General of Purchases William Buchanan, and Clothier General James Mease, the Continental army was still a seasonal army, which required reduced sustenance over a winter that would, presumably, be spent in winter barracks. To further exacerbate matters, Mifflin resigned in October, and Congress saw no reason to fill the vacancy immediately. This left the most crucial service, which organized and operated wagon transport and forage collection, without a Master. All of the military support services, including the Commissary, depended upon the Quarter Master's Department for wagon transport. With the department in administrative disarray, the purchasing commissaries could no longer count on even intermittent transport of preserved meat and barreled flour. Southeastern Pennsylvania could, with energetic purchasing, provide sufficient flour to feed the army the 20,000 pounds per day it needed to survive and function, but unless it could be transported to Valley Forge it was of no use. The Middle Atlantic states were in the grips of a meat shortage, and by the end of December the army was almost entirely dependent on New England for supplies of beef for the daily ration. Because the Commissary General failed to appreciate the importance of the droves of cattle from New England in supplying meat to the army, he did not maintain proper control over his deputies east of the Hudson. Buchanan's ineptness

became legendary and it took considerable time for his successor, Jeremiah Wadsworth, and his more able deputies to repair the damage wreaked by inattention. Similarly, the Clothier General James Mease found the task of supplying the entire army to be beyond his abilities. Mease, like Buchanan, suffered from myopia when it came to perceiving the importance of New England to his supply system.

PART I - The Commissary

The first of three parts, this section presents an analysis of the failure of the Commissary Department during the Valley Forge period, concentrating on organizational and administrative difficulties, and the disruption and subsequent resuscitation of the Quarter Master's Department, which was of central importance to the failure or success of the Commissary.

Chapter I - Introduction

The chapter contains an overview of the administrative history of the Commissary Department, and a discussion of the commodity-producing potential of southeastern Pennsylvania prior to and at the beginning of the Revolution. This prelude is necessary to analyze the causes, depth, and severity of the food shortages which beset the army.

Chapter II - Qualifying Supply

Inflation, price regulation, administrative ineptitude, and the difficulties attending winter overland transportation contributed to the disintegration of the commissary system, and basic substances such as salt, flour, and tallow became increasingly scarce. The central recurrent problem, however, was the absence of adequate means of transportation.

Chapter III - The Eastern Department

From the autumn of 1777, the Commissary Department was under the direction of William Buchanan, a native Pennsylvanian. Buchanan was gifted with little prescience and less administrative ability, and he neglected Commissary affairs in the region east of the Hudson, known as the "Eastern Department." This was to have particularly unfortunate consequences for the army later in the winter, as their principal meat supply came from this region. Buchanan's elaborate plan to import salt from New England into the Middle Department consumed his attention, apparently to the exclusion of almost everything else.

Chapter IV - Toward Valley Forge

During the autumn campaign of 1777, Thomas Jones, the Assistant Deputy Commissary of Issues with the army, presided over the Commissary issuance doled out to the troops. The shortages he faced in October and November presaged the more severe ones which erupted in December, once the army had arrived at Valley Forge.

Chapter V - "The Sayings of Solomon"

The food crisis of late December, along with a generalized supply deficiency, curtailed Washington's elaborate military plans for December and January. Thomas Jones was unable to elicit sufficient assistance from his absent superior, the Commissary General of Issues, from the flagging Quarter Master's Department, or from the state of Pennsylvania.

Chapter VI - Cross Purposes

Once Congress and the state of Pennsylvania had become aware of the supply dearths, ill-concerted attempts were launched by the Board of War and the state to alleviate the shortages. The actions of each, however, were mired in political animosities, and were minimally effective.

Chapter VII - "A Picture of Distress".

The February food crisis was certainly the most serious threat to the unity of the army which occurred during the winter. Only emergency seizures of the most informal sort saved the army from dissolution. With all administrative departments in disarray, the weight of censure at camp fell upon the beleaguered Commissary of Issues, Thomas Jones, and on Commissary General of Purchases for the Middle Department, Ephraim Blaine.

Chapter VIII - A New Regime

It was clear by mid-February, to Congress and to Washington, that personnel adequate to their tasks must be placed at the heads of the support departments. Washington successfully advanced his own candidate, Nathanael Greene, as Quarter Master General. Jeremiah Wadsworth of Connecticut replaced William Buchanan as Commissary General of Purchases, and the two organizations began to revive slowly with the onset of more favorable weather.

Chapter IX - "From Hand to Mouth"

Greene's and Wadsworth's strenuous efforts could not wholly reform their re nascent departments by the opening of the spring campaign. The improvements they instituted, however, were sufficient to allow the army to take the field in respectable form in June, 1778. While Greene pressed his subordinates relentlessly for the purchase of horses, harness, wagons, and camp equipage, Wadsworth set matters in order in the long-neglected Eastern Department.

PART II - The Clothier's Department

The troops at Valley Forge were described as "ragged" and "naked" with relentless repetition during the winter of 1777-1778. Part II discusses how

these deficiencies came about, and why the remedies devised to correct the shortage of clothing and shoes were so ineffectual.

Chapter I - "Very Light and Easy"

James Mease, the Clothier General appointed late in 1776, voiced his inability to supply sufficient clothing for the Continental army during the autumn of 1777. Congress responded by reassigning the task to the state governments. This measure, taken so late in the campaigning season, gave the states little opportunity to organize their collection and manufacturing efforts before the onset of winter. The result was that the clothing provided to the troops varied radically in quantity and quality, from regiment to regiment.

Chapter II - "Cry Aloud and Spare Not"

In January and February the replacement clothing for the army became chronically scarce. A variety of expedients were adopted by the states, by Washington, and by the general officers in order to clothe the soldiers. The Connecticut troops, for instance, were clothed largely from collections taken up by the parishes of their native state, while Anthony Wayne negotiated with a private contractor to provide uniforms for his Pennsylvania brigade.

Chapter III - One and a Half Shirts to a Company

Despite the arrival of improved weather, and thus improved transportation, replacement clothing issuances continued to be scarce. The Clothier General refused to accede to Washington's reiterated requests to appear at camp to take matters in hand, and he apparently ignored substantial sources of clothing in New England.

Chapter IV - "A Disorder Called the Meases"

James Mease retained his office as Clothier General, despite growing evidence of incompetence. Although greater quantities of clothing were made available in the last spring, Mease had compiled a record sufficiently disastrous to effectively number his days in office. Hampered by Congress' inability to supply him with sufficient funds, his indifference to supplies of clothing in New England earned him the censure of the army, and eventually of Congress.

PART III - The Military Stores Department

Chapter I - "A Very Respectable Train"

The Continental army arrived at Valley Forge with a scant adequacy of small arms, and with a reliable supply of artillery and ammunition. Congress' chaotic contracting system, however, was not conducive to providing a steady flow of arms and ammunition to the infantry, artillery, and dragoons. The responsibility for repairing and manufacturing military equipage was split in a none too logical fashion between the Military Stores Department and the Quarter Master's Department. Imported arms from France were just beginning to find their way to the troops in quantity.

Chapter II - "Gentlemen Artificers"

It was expected that once an army was in winter quarters, the Commander in Chief would energetically address himself to preparation for the next campaign. Washington was thus intimately concerned with securing sufficient supplies of arms and equipage before spring. In this, his principal aide was his Chief of Artillery, Henry Knox. The Commissary General of Military Stores,

Benjamin Flower, was seriously ill during mid-winter, and the task of supplying bayonets, spontoons, and leather goods devolved upon officers within the army who had experience with such matters. Production of ammunition at laboratories at camp and in the interior of the state rarely reached levels of efficiency which were acceptable to Washington.

Chapter III - Skirmishes With the Board of War

During the late winter, the distribution of small arms and the positioning of artillery in "grand arsenals" became a matter of contention between Washington and his persistent antagonists on the Board of War. With the assistance of Knox and the gradually recuperating Benjamin Flower, Washington managed, by just a few weeks, to arm fully his troops and new recruits before the onset of the campaign in June.

Chapter IV - "Uprisings and Mischief"

The Pennsylvania frontier was buffeted by Indian uprisings of particular severity during the late winter and spring of 1778, which required sending arms and regular troops westward. Pennsylvania gunmakers were hard pressed to supply sufficient rifles for frontier defense and muskets for the use of state militia levies serving with the army. The dragoons, who required elaborate equipage which was scarce and expensive, relied upon civilian contractors for saddles, carbines, pistols, and sabres. As arms were received from New England with agonizing slowness, the efficiency of the Military Stores Department was further enfeathered by the misdemeanors of one of its principal officers, Cornelius Sweers.

Chapter V - "A Man of Spirit and Business"

The Quarter Master's Department shared an increasing proportion of the responsibility for equipping the army after Nathanael Greene's assumption of the office of Quarter Master General. He selected as his Deputy for Military Stores a man of prodigious energy, James Abeel. It was in large part due to Abeel's rapid resuscitation of the military stores office at Reading that the army was rendered mobile by June 19, 1778.

VOLUME III - IN THE TRUE RUSTIC ORDER

Despite the deathless currency of the images of suffering sustained by the troops at Valley Forge, not a great deal has hitherto been known about the community of structures and objects which composed the soldiers' material environment. Considering the paucity of tools provided for them to build their huts and auxiliary structures, they of necessity created an encampment complex of impressive dimensions, even if Sir William Howe referred to it derisively as "Log Town." Contrary to the images invoked by widely disseminated nineteenth century engravings, the soldiers did not spend the winter freezing in isolated huts in a barren landscape. The huts were packed closely together, separated by muddy "streets"; refuse collection was sporadic and sanitary conditions defy the twentieth century imagination. Each brigade had its fetid hospital and slaughter pen, outside of which steaming offal further sullied the atmosphere. Teamsters drove brigades of supply wagons and droves of cattle daily into the stores and stockyards around the camp, and in the spring flat-bottomed boats plied the Schuylkill between camp and Reading bearing loads of forage and military equipage. When weather permitted, squads of men labored on the field fortifications ringing the encampment sites and set off daily to forage.

The various manuscript maps drawn during and after the encampment form a problematic basis for positing the existence and location of structures and features within the encampment perimeter. The quality and durability of structures were also affected by the quantity and quality of tools available to the soldiers. The material variety of the camp scene is suggested by the sorts of structures built, and the preexisting buildings subjected to adaptive use by the army: dwelling huts, hospital huts, stores and magazines,

guardhouses, sutlers' and artificers' shops, fortifications, access roads, adjacent farm dwellings and auxiliary buildings, and mills.

Jacqueline Thibaut
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