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Episode 348: Valley Forge

[00:00:00] **Announcer:** You're listening to an AirWave Media podcast.

[00:00:04] **Liz Covart:** *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of The Omohundro Institute and is sponsored by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Hello and welcome to episode 348 of *Ben Franklin's World*, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American past have shaped the present-day world we live in. And I'm your host, Liz Covart. On December 19, 1777, George Washington marched his Continental army into its winter encampment at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Now, if you think back to what we learned in school, Valley Forge is the winter when the soldiers in the Continental army did everything they could just to keep warm. They built wooden huts where they huddled inside around a campfire. They wrapped cloth around their feet and their hands because they lacked socks and gloves. And if they had shoes—and some of them didn't have shoes we're taught—they were chewing on their shoe leather because they often had little to no food. Valley Forge, we were taught, was a winter of great privation, but we were also taught that it was a winter of great virtue because despite all of the freezing conditions and the lack of food and supplies, the army stayed and readied themselves for their continued fight for independence in the spring of 1778.

But is this what really happened at Valley Forge? Did the men of the Continental army really experience such privation that they were eating their own shoe leather? Ricardo "Rick" Herrera joins us to investigate these claims. Rick is a historian of American military history and a visiting professor in the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College. He's also the author of the book *Feeding Washington's Army: Surviving the Valley Forge Winter of 1778*. Now during our investigation of the winter of 1778, Rick reveals information about the Continental army's creation and its formation as a fighting force, the logistics of military supply and who was in charge of supplying the Continental army, and details about the Valley Forge winter in 1777 and 1778.

But first, happy New Year and welcome to 2023! I can't believe it's here either, but here we are, we're in 2023. Now, Holly White and I have some exciting plans for you over this next year. In just two episodes, we're going to be celebrating episode 350. And boy, do we have quite the surprise for you, as this is with a bigtime guest about one of your frequently requested topics. I know it's a bit of a mystery here, but I really want to surprise you. And later in the year, we have episodes planned and recorded about privateers in the American Revolution, James Forten and the Museum of the American Revolution, the Moravians, and St. Augustine, Florida, and that's just the sampling of some of the episodes we have planned for you. So lots of exciting episodes and topics as we work through our ninth year of production. And as always, thank you for being a part of our community and for listening to the show. And with that, let's go meet our guest historian and discover the reality of what happened at Valley Forge.



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Joining us is a visiting professor in the Department of National Security and Strategy at the US Army War College. Before becoming a historian, our guest served as an armor and cavalry officer in the United States Army. He has spent most of his career as a historian who specializes in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American military history and he's written numerous articles and two books, including *Feeding Washington's Army: Surviving the Valley Forge Winter of 1778*. Welcome to *Ben Franklin's World*, Ricardo Herrera.

[00:03:58] **Rick Herrera:** Hi, Liz. I'm very happy to enter it.

[00:04:01] **Liz Covart:** It's a fun place, this *Ben Franklin's World*, and we hope you enjoy your time in it. So we're going to be talking about the United States' first army in its memorable winter at Valley Forge in the winter of 1777 and 1778. Rick, what do we need to know about the Continental army as a fighting force and could you tell us a bit about the context of its creation?

[00:04:22] **Rick Herrera:** You know, the Continental army, God, I want to call it something of a pickup team. What takes place is that following the initial hostilities in New England in April of 1775, the British garrison in Boston gets surrounded by New England militiamen and the Continental Congress on the 14 of June, 1775, decides to adopt these fellows as the Continental army. It's not terribly continental. It's mostly New England militiamen, although we will see the first Continental regiment, which is comprised primarily of riflemen from Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. And in fact, the colonel of that first regiment is buried here in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. But they get adopted on the 14 of June, and that's the date that the U.S. Army celebrates as its birthday, making it the senior service in the United States. It gets adopted then, and the size of it fluctuates. We estimate that somewhere around 230,000 soldiers served in the army from 1775 through 1784 when it was finally disbanded. At any one time its largest size was maybe around 48,000 strong. And that's really in every theater, every department. So it's not in any one concentrated place. In fact, Washington's largest army that he commanded was during the New York campaign of 1776, and it's about 23,000 strong, Continentals and militiamen. When he marches into Valley Forge, he's got about 10,000 soldiers. When they march out for Monmouth, something over 14,000 strong in May of 1778.

But the army, in many ways, was a microcosm of American society. It was decentralized in the sense that every state raised its own Continental line, and these were based upon quotas assigned to the various states. So each state had its own organization, although they did serve under the aegis of this larger thing called the Continental army. The first enlistments, you know, in 1775, and then in 1776, they follow on along the lines of something that Charles Royster has called "the *rage militaire*." And so these are the guys who are patriotic. They're in there for it. It's excitement, it's a sense of duty, you name it. Every soldier's motives for enlisting then, just as they are today, are very particular to that soldier. So they fall into a variety of reasons. By the time we get to the Valley Forge encampment, we're actually looking at the third Continental



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army, and Washington has finally gotten Congress to agree to longer-term enlistments, you know, three years, my God, that's great, because previously, what are they getting? One-year service. And that's really not a good deal for this thing that they're trying to create, the United States of America.

So Washington gets this three-year force. They were organized very much along the same lines as the British Army. So sort of an American take, if you will, as to how the Americans, particularly Washington, envisioned a regular army should look like. So primarily infantry, bolstered by artillery. They had four regiments of Continental light dragoons, and as part of the American army's tradition through, frankly, the nineteenth century, most officers struggled to know what to do with the cavalry or how to use it properly. There was no real tradition of it. So it's very much this American-style version of the British Army, and it follows many of the same tactics—linear tactics, maneuvering by touch of elbow, trying to fire in volleys, you name it.

[00:08:25] **Liz Covart:** Did regional culture impact the culture of the Continental army at all? You mentioned that at its start, the Continental army was mostly made up of New Englanders, and then later we have the addition of riflemen from Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. And as men would come in and out of the army—and you said there were about 230,000 soldiers who served throughout the American War for Independence—as men would come in and out of the army, how did their regional cultures and origins impact the army's culture? I'm thinking in particular of Washington's shock at how New Englanders elected their officers and how he thought they were just generally undisciplined.

[00:09:02] **Rick Herrera:** And Washington's famous remark is that he finds them an exceeding dirty lot. That's really not the tone that you should take with your soldiers. You may be the general, but you got to show them some respect. It's a two-way street, Your Excellency. But Washington and many of these soldiers, most of them had never traveled more than, say, fifty miles away from home. And so when they march across the length and breadth of the Eastern Seaboard, they're entering entirely new worlds. One of the things that, for example, Joseph Plumb Martin—who's probably one of the best-known enlisted men of the war because of his memoirs—Martin writes about Pennsylvanians as Southerners. He can't understand their accents. They can't understand his, and so the regional distinctions were incredibly pronounced and they're trying to get a feel for one another, trying to understand one another, and it's really through their service that starts to create more of an identity as Americans.

Not that that ever happens fully, because we do have, of course, that thing often called the late unpleasantness, the Civil War, which this dysfunctional republic goes to war with itself and helps create at least some form of American identity after four years of mutual slaughter. But the regional distinctions are incredibly varied, and those are preserved within the regiments. There are a handful of "additional regiments," as they were termed. And they're probably the closest



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things that you will see to a Continental regiment. And so they might have soldiers from three, four, five different states. So that's about the closest you're going to get to anything resembling a Continental regiment in the truest sense.

[00:10:57] **Liz Covart:** That makes me wonder if men like Joseph Plumb Martin, who I believe was from Connecticut, I wonder if Martin and other men took opportunities to visit and experience different regional camps as they were serving in the army. Like did someone like Martin say, "I'm going to breakfast with the Pennsylvania camp and I'm going to try out their food, and then maybe for dinner I'm going to go to Virginia and find out what their entertainment and food is like," just as a different way of sampling different American cultures as they're all coming together behind this cause for independence.

[00:11:26] **Rick Herrera:** One of the things that takes place, for example, at Valley Forge, what Washington does, disperse smaller elements to form a screen line to man security outposts and what have you. And these soldiers are going out on patrols and they're meeting new people. They're meeting different types of farmers, different types of crops and settlement patterns. So this is as much a war for the creation of an American republic as it is a war of, and this is unintentional, mind you, a war of self-discovery, a war of discovery of this country that they're trying to create.

[00:12:08] **Liz Covart:** So we have this highly regionalized Continental army that is both a fighting force and a place of cultural exchange, a place where soldiers could discover what the United States that they're fighting for really is. Now Rick, you mentioned earlier that at its largest, the Continental army would be about 48,000 men strong, and that was during the New York campaign. What were the logistics in trying to supply this army and who's even in charge of trying to supply this army? Was it the Second Continental Congress? Was it George Washington? Or was this something that was entirely left up to the states?

[00:12:42] **Rick Herrera:** Supplying the Continental army was the eight-year nightmare. Congress had set up a system—and it was done out of the best of intentions—it set up a system that was intended to try and prevent the growth of military power. And as they looked at this, here's the army. It's got brute strength in the form of soldiers, armed. But you then look at the logistical piece. Purchasing agents, commissaries, quartermasters, all of these men have got financial power. That's another form of growing military power, growing centralized power. And this scares the bejeebers out of Congress. So in order to try and prevent power, in order to check the growth of power, Congress sets up some complex rules governing the purchasing and distribution of supplies. Well-intentioned it was, but a disaster for most of the war. The times that the system did work, those tended to be the rarities, and that's really once you get Nathanael Greene in office. And this is a post that he does not want to hold. You know, as he complains,



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who has ever heard of a quartermaster general in history? He'll finally get his chance, though, following the debacle at Camden and return to field duty.

But to get back to the original question, trying to supply this army was a herculean task. If you look at a soldier's rations, for example, every private is allotted one pound of beef or half pound of pork or one pound of salt fish per day. A pound of bread or flour daily, three pints of peas or beans per week, a pint of milk per day, and a quart of beer per day. And there are other pieces in there, candles, soap, and so forth. Very rarely did any soldier get that. And if you look at officers' rations, they get extra rations in part because they're expected to, in the case of senior officers, host other officers for dinner, but also they've got servants to take care of. It's very rare that anybody receives as full rations. And in fact, quite often the rations are spoiled when they do arrive. So it's really a disastrous system. A big piece of it is due to the worthlessness of Continental money. When we fast forward to near the end of the war, 1781, 225 paper dollars are worth \$1 in Continental specie. That's how worthless this stuff is. And farmers and others are just unwilling to accept this worthless money.

And another problem in there is the fact that by 1778 Congress has changed the regulations and now purchasing agents have got to post a \$5,000 bond, and throughout the war they have had to rely upon their own extensive networks of suppliers. And so they're literally venturing forth their own capital to try and feed the army. Then they turn in receipts, and then Congress has to examine the receipts. And when they get paid? Well, that's anybody's guess.

[00:16:01] **Liz Covart:** Could you take us inside the logistical process of trying to supply the Continental army with food? My understanding about supply is that even though Americans were new at having their own army that they had to supply, there were men out there like Phillip Schuyler, who served in the British army's quartermaster department during the Seven Years' War, who had some idea and some experience at supplying large armies. So how much of this previous supply experience from the British army carried over and informed the supply of the American army?

[00:16:33] **Rick Herrera:** I'm glad you mentioned Schuyler and others like him. Most of the Americans who had had any experience on the quartermaster or commissary side of the house had not been doing it for large forces, and so they've got some introduction to it, but not a real proper grounding, as it were. And they do understand some of the basics. The big problem, though, is trying to go out and purchase these supplies. And as I'd noted earlier, the fact that Continental dollars were nearly worthless and getting more worthless by the day, in some cases, the purchasing agents were really challenged to try and get ahold of basics like food, and that's the easy stuff for Americans. This war is being waged in a land of plenty. As observers often noted, America was probably the best poor man's country in the world. But trying to get these supplies was a real challenge.



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Another piece was the transportation. Not enough wagons, not enough horses, not enough harnesses, not enough men willing to serve as teamsters to drive these wagons. Part of that's related to pay. Part of that is related to militia duty. Part of that is related to the fact that many of these men are farmers and they can't afford to be away from what is their real work, which is tending the family farm. So you've got a host of problems in that. When it comes to manufactured goods, Americans were manufacturing some firearms. But for the most part, they're getting captured stocks of British Brown Bess muskets. They're also getting imports of French Charleville muskets. They're getting captured powder. They're manufacturing their own powder. The same thing with shot. Same thing with cannon. They're trying to manufacture their own but the industrial capacity of the United States, such as it was, was not terribly large. So they're doing better off by actually getting supplies from the French, from the Dutch, some that are captured, and various other sources.

Much the same can be said for uniforms. Trying to uniform and shoe this army was another monumental task, and you see in Washington's letters the tremendous burden that he's got. He's got officers who are manning the staff departments and they're of varying quality. Some are quite good, some you just wonder how they manage to get out of bed without hurting themselves. And Washington is often functioning as his own supply officer. And so he's writing letters to the governors of the states, "Hey, send supplies. I need help." He'll send out officers from various Continental regiments to their home states to try and talk to the politicians to get supplies for the army from them. So it's really a game of desperation and they really do try their best to try and feed and clothe and arm and shoe this army, it's a struggle for the entirety of the war.

[00:19:38] **Liz Covart:** As a historian who has looked at these major logistical challenges and supply chains, if you were to grade the Continental Congress and the officers in the army at supplying the Continental army, what grade would you give them? How well did they succeed in their task to supply the army?

[00:19:55] **Rick Herrera:** Am I allowed to grade them on effort?

[00:19:57] **Liz Covart:** Sure, why not? What about two grades? One for effort and one for accomplishment?

[00:20:02] **Rick Herrera:** I'd have to give the officers, there are a few who just stand out for very poor performance, but by and large for effort, I've got to give the Continental commissary at the end, quartermaster officers an *A* for effort. These guys really exert themselves. It's something else. In terms of their actual accomplishments, the reality, oh gosh, I'm going to be generous and say a *C+*. And that's due to circumstances that are frankly out of their hands. Congress's intentions, hallelujah. Thank you so much for your interest in virtue. But virtue



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doesn't feed empty bellies. Congress, you're getting a *D*, your intentions are *A+*, but the reality is you're barely passing and that's because of the fears and so much more.

[00:20:58] **Liz Covart:** Now because of the issues it had with supply chains and the worthlessness of the Continental dollar, the army often just had to overcome its inadequate supply. So Rick, how did the Continental army face its supply challenges? Could you tell us about the impressment of goods, the foraging for goods and other techniques and tactics the army would've used to overcome inadequate supply?

[00:21:21] **Rick Herrera:** Foraging was a constant for the Continental army. Now, I'm not going to say that they were following Maurice Saxe's injunction that it's better to live off of your enemy and spare your prince the expense of feeding the army because these soldiers are campaigning in the country that they hope to create, the republic they hope to create. So they will go out, look for the supplies that they need. On a good operation there'll generally be a purchasing agent accompanying the troops. This purchasing agent will keep records and issue IOUs to the farmers for the goods that are impressed. Do the farmers actually want to have anything impressed? Of course not. Nobody wants their property taken from them. And in fact, if you're lucky, your farm will never be anywhere near any soldiers because everybody's army was a tremendous engine of destruction, even if they were on your side. Your fence rails are going to be gone. Your fruit trees, they're going to be picked clean. Your cattle, your ducks, your chickens, you name it, they will be gone because soldiers are hungry and they need to feed themselves. And unless they're kept a close eye on, everything's going to disappear. But the army, it was regularly foraging throughout its existence no matter where it went.

Now, there were times, as I said, that the supply system did work and that lessened the need to forage. But for the most part, soldiers are going out and trying to get what they can. And that, while necessary to sustain the army, that really forces the army to reduce its combat strength because instead of preparing to fight, or instead of actually going out and patrolling and looking for the enemy, trying to gather intelligence, you name it, soldiers are out trying to feed their fellow soldiers. Now, I should also add, though, that the British were doing the same thing. There's a rule of thumb for the British army in this period that they needed six months of supplies on hand. That only happens once or twice throughout the entirety of the war. And so during the occupation of Philadelphia, General Howe's soldiers spend more of their time going out looking for food and firewood than they do searching for the enemy. So the need to supply and to sustain these armies really helps drive much of their actions on the battlefield. It helps limit some of their actions on the battlefield because of the necessities of taking care of soldiers.

[00:23:48] **Liz Covart:** How did the Continental army define the act of foraging and the act of impressment? Because these are actions that we're going to continue to talk about.



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[00:23:55] **Rick Herrera:** Foraging is essentially sending out bodies of troops, and this varies. The British, for example, have to send out something like a brigade strength, so in other words, two or more battalions to forage. One to actually go out and look for food and supplies, that's the foraging piece. Another battalion serving as a covering force because you can't go outside of Philadelphia very far and not risk getting attacked by American Continentals or militiamen. So they need a covering force to protect the foragers. So they're going out and that's the actual act of gathering stuff.

Impressment. "Hello, Mr. Farmer. I'm knocking on your door. You seem to have X amount of supplies. I'd like to take X minus this amount of supplies from you. Here's a receipt." There's impressment. Now, depending on how things are going, sometimes the impressment may be uncompensated, and in fact, Nathanael Greene encounters this in March of 1778 when he leads out his column from Valley Forge. He gets tired of farmers trying to sequester their goods, and previously he'd been pretty good about giving out receipts. Now he tells Washington, "I hear their cries, but like Pharaoh, I harden my heart," and he decides that if you sequester your goods, my soldiers are going to seize them. You'll get no receipts. So you're not only getting worthless Continental dollars, you're getting nothing.

[00:25:24] **Liz Covart:** So when we're talking about foraging, we aren't always talking about the army going out to find food and gather food as they go. We're also seeing the Continental army and perhaps the British army, too, taking note of what other supplies a farmer or a storekeeper might have on hand that they can impress or take from the farmer or a storekeeper for an IOU or not later?

[00:25:45] **Rick Herrera:** Right. Foraging is generally associated with food and food for soldiers, food for animals. But in part of the foraging, we have to expand it. And this is really the search for supplies. And so one of the things that the foraging columns are looking for when Washington dispatches these fellows was also horses for the cavalry. And harnesses for drawing wagons, you name it. One of the things that I was really fortunate to come across was Henry Lee's account book in Maryland and Delaware, and Hollingsworth, who accompanied him, Henry Hollingsworth, left careful records as to the number of horses that were impressed, the number of hands high that they were. The better horses would be assigned to the light cavalry, to the light dragoons, that is. And so they're going out and looking for all of the stuff of war, not just food, not just feed, but harnesses, leather, saddles, clothing if they need it, weapons if they need them, horses, you name it.

[00:26:48] **Liz Covart:** Well, thank you for those clarifying details, because these terms and these actions are going to keep coming up as we dive into the story of Valley Forge. But before we dive into that history, why don't we take a moment to thank our episode sponsor.



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[00:27:04] **Carolyn Eastman:** Hi, I'm Carolyn Eastman of Virginia Commonwealth University and my newest book, *The Strange Genius of Mr. O: The World of the United States' First Forgotten Celebrity*, is out now. During the early nineteenth century, James Ogilvie was the very face of eloquence. He had been a burned-out immigrant schoolteacher who discovered that he had a real knack for the spoken word, delivering thoughtful and passionate speeches. And in 1808, he decided to abandon the school room and undertake a career as a traveling public speaker. The reason why Ogilvie matters so much that the history of early America is that he was, in essence, the first great public speaker who vast numbers of early Americans were able to see. He was somebody who was terribly eager, not just to make a name for himself, but also to help Americans imagine a kind of, maybe not unity, but at least he could get them unified in thinking together about the same subjects. And he succeeded. One of the most remarkable things about his story is how long he succeeded in doing exactly that. Be sure to pick up your copy of *The Strange Genius of Mr. O* wherever you buy your books.

[00:28:35] **Liz Covart:** Okay. On to Valley Forge. So Rick's book *Feeding Washington's Army* centers on the Continental army's winter at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania in late 1777 and early 1778. Rick, would you remind us how the Continental army came to winter at Valley Forge and about the events that pushed the army to encamp there?

[00:28:56] **Rick Herrera:** The British army had landed at Head of Elk, Maryland in August of 1777. This is part of Howe's strategy: find the Continental army, administer a decisive defeat, take the capital. Not only is this a very physical victory, destruction of the enemy's force, it's also a very important symbolic one, capturing the enemy's capital, chasing the Congress out of Philadelphia. It shows the weakness of the American cause in Howe's mind. Well, Washington will meet them at Cooch's Bridge, the only fight that takes place in Delaware during the war. They'll be driven back. They'll continue to skirmish. In September of 1777, both armies meet at Brandywine, along Chad's Ford. Washington is defeated, and this is something that Washington sadly was rather used to. Despite the defeat, though, Washington's army held together pretty well. And in fact, during the retirement of the army, Nathanael Greene really distinguishes himself by using his two brigades of Virginians, a division, using them to execute a giant L-shaped ambush on the British army as it advances southward. And so as the British crest this hill, Greene's soldiers open fire and the British are greeted with .75- and .69-caliber balls in the face. That drives them back. Green holds them together.

The army retires to Chester. There are other fights at Paoli where Anthony Wayne gets attacked and surprised at night. He's deeply humiliated. The Battle above the Clouds, which is the battlefield, is today at Immaculata College in Pennsylvania. Both armies facing off and then a downpour, and they just kind of stand there and stare at one another. "Our powders wet. We can't really shoot at each other. Charging up and down on a muddy hill with smooth-soled shoes, that's not a good idea." They stare a little bit longer, then both armies just march away. This is a battle that literally fizzles. After that, Washington will attempt a counterattack at Germantown in



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October. That also goes poorly. Although there'd been some initial success, and in fact, Howe rode out and shamed the light infantry, the elite of the British army, "For shame, for shame, light bobs!" and leads them into a counterattack. Again, some poor performance by Continental officers. Some good performance by some of them. The soldiers, however, acquit themselves pretty well.

Finally, we fast forward to December. Washington is still looking for a fight. You know, this guy was an aggressive commander. He draws up the army at White Marsh and begins to fortify it. And this is one thing that the Continental army was incredibly skilled at, and that's digging field fortifications. So Washington's men fortify this chain of hills, this ridge line that runs from east to west. And he's essentially saying to Howe, "come on out, attack me. I really do want you to do it." And Washington's got visions of perhaps another Bunker Hill. Howe marshes out, he looks at it. There's some skirmishing off to his left. Howe, too, has visions of Bunker Hill. After all, he had commanded the assaults there. Howe thinks, "Now this isn't a good idea." He's got the husband, the strength of his army. His soldiers' lives are precious, they're expensive. They march back into Philadelphia and from there he will begin to set up his occupation.

Washington, though, in the meantime, starts to hold councils of war with his generals, and he sends out the questions ahead of time, has his generals send the responses back in written form. And this is because he wants to control the conversation as much as possible, not to control what their answers are going to be, rather to make sure that everybody stays focused and doesn't go off on tangents. So his basic question is, should we launch a winter campaign? Now, on the surface, this might sound like madness because this is an army that's just been defeated at every turn during this campaign for Philadelphia. But if we think about what had taken place the year before, Trenton one, Trenton two, Princeton, that's an army that had been defeated, chased out of New York, chased across the Jerseys, and finally into Pennsylvania, yet a counter attack and won these three stunning victories in the space of about ten days. Why not now? Washington's got an army that's more seasoned. Its officers are certainly more seasoned. It's not out of the realm of reality.

The back and forth with his generals goes on for several weeks. The generals bring up things like Continental credit. If we suffer a defeat, what happens to our credit? So they're thinking about finances. They're also thinking about the secondary and even tertiary consequences of victory or defeat. If we win, then what? Well, the British are likely to withdraw to their ships in the Delaware River and we're left holding Philadelphia. To what end? We haven't defeated the British army. If we suffer a defeat, then what happens? What happens with morale? What happens to the Continental dollar? What happens to our ability to resist the British? All of these things go into the discussions. Finally, Washington does a personal reconnaissance. He observes the strength of the British fortifications in Philadelphia and decides it's not worth it.



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Then comes a decision. Where do we winter? And there are a variety of suggestions that go out. Some recommending Wilmington, Delaware. It's a good place to keep watch. It's close enough to Philadelphia. It's also along the river. The problem is that river gives the British mobility. They command the river because of the Royal Navy squadron that's there. Do we go to Reading or Lancaster? Well, that's too far away, and that essentially surrenders southeastern Pennsylvania to the British. We need to challenge them. Finally, they come upon the Great Valley and Washington makes a decision. We're going to camp at Valley Forge and he's also been talking to governors in Pennsylvania. He's been corresponding with the Continental Congress, with Henry Laurens, the president of the Congress, writing also to the governor of New Jersey. What's best? Each governor has his own state to take care of. Washington has got much larger consequences, or much larger thoughts, that occupy him. Valley Forge is the least bad of all the bad choices that face him. So he selects this and they march in in December, about 12,000 strong.

[00:35:39] **Liz Covart:** Could you set the scene for us, Rick? If we've never been to Valley Forge—and none of us have been to Valley Forge during the winter of 1777–78—but would you tell us about the geography of Valley Forge and what made it a good place, or at least the least bad place for Washington to incamp his army there for winter?

[00:35:58] **Rick Herrera:** Valley Forge is the encampment sits on high ground, and that's something that you definitely want in a military encampment. The high ground not only allows you to observe your enemy's approach from a greater distance, very practically it extends the range of your artillery. Don't ask me to go into the mathematics. I've had one of my students who is a former field artillery battalion commander, he's tried to explain it to me, but like most historians, when it gets into math, my mind just asks, "what are you talking about?" But I do know enough that the higher the ground, the further you can shoot. So Valley Forge sits atop this. There are also limited roads that enter the encampment, which is great for controlling access and providing security. As far as the trees that are nearby, by the time the Army begins to build its huts in December of 1777, those trees are all gone. So if you visit there, and I would urge everyone to visit Valley Forge, get rid of all the trees, take them out of your mind's eye, because these trees have now gone into creating soldiers' huts. They've gone into stabilizing fortifications, they've gone into firewood, you name it. So what this does, besides creating this treeless landscape, is clear the fields of fire for the artillery in case the enemy should approach.

So what Washington has done is create something like the fourth largest city in North America. It's actually an armed camp. And I suggest to my readers, in fact, when I talk about the book, I suggest that we think about it as the eighteenth-century equivalent of the modern forward operating base. Something that many people are used to hearing about from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. So this is an armed temporary camp from which an army projects force. And so this is what Valley Forge is. It's FOB Valley Forge.



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[00:38:01] **Liz Covart:** In my mind, I am picturing this very wide area with high ground that has been entirely stripped of trees. And from this high ground, this is where we can see tents, wooden huts that the soldiers built from the trees that they felled, some artillery encampments on the edge of Camp. Rick, would we also be able to see any towns or townspeople from our placement at Valley Forge? Would we have been able to see any farms in the surrounding area?

[00:38:26] **Rick Herrera:** You've certainly got some smaller settlements nearby, towns, villages. You've got outlying farms that are nearby. But for the most part, the army will keep to itself there, send out patrols. Those soldiers will get to visit other farms. They'll meet the local people. There're also outposts that are in different places, so that certainly extends the contact with the population. But Washington has it at probably just the right distance, about eighteen miles from Philadelphia. So fairly easy to detect an enemy approach. He's also got patrols that are out. Those make it easier for him to detect an enemy approach. He doesn't want to be too terribly close to the towns because that allows people to spy on him. That allows people to pass information to the British. Although having said that, security was not all that good. There's a German fellow by the name of Krafft who spends about two weeks wandering around the camp looking for a commission in the Continental army. He doesn't get it, instead, he gets a commission in one of the Hessian regiments.

[00:39:35] **Liz Covart:** One of the bad aspects of having trees around your encampment, which as you said, Rick, is that if you get fired upon by artillery, those trees tend to come down. They crash on you. They splinter into a bazillion different pieces and spray you with shrapnel. Plus, trees are also prone to catching fire, especially from campfires where you have soldiers who might be a little lazy in tending them. But in winter, trees, even the leafless ones, that is what can provide your army with shelter and insulate it from the elements. And we are talking about the winter of 1777–1778, which is during the Little Ice Age. So Rick, what did the absence of trees mean for Washington's encampment and for protecting his army from the elements

[00:40:18] **Rick Herrera:** Granted, the trees, as you point out, were absent, but they're not completely absent. They've now gone into making those huts. And so they were providing some form of shelter for the soldiers. And the huts were anything but the uniform, very nice-looking huts that we see today at the national park. Each one varies depending on the quality of work put into it by the soldiers who are living in those huts. So the trees are there in the form of their immediate shelter, but in terms of actually providing anything, not too many around there. And in fact, soldiers would continue to go out further and further from camp in order to search out fuel. That means looking for trees that are standing.

[00:41:04] **Liz Covart:** Now in his book *Feeding Washington's Army* Rick argues that Valley Forge has taken on a mythic quality in our American memory, and so he teaches us that Americans during the American Revolution really had to overcome a lot of privation and



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suffering to see the new nation through to its independence. Rick, would you dispel the myth of Valley Forge for us? What really happened during the winter of 1777–1778? Because I think when we hear “Valley Forge,” most of our minds think about starving troops, freezing troops, soldiers suffering from disease and supply issues. And from what I’ve read, if you look at the actual historical record of Valley Forge, it was actually a much easier experience than the really hard winter experience of Jockey Hollow in New Jersey during the winter of 1779–1780

[00:41:52] **Rick Herrera:** Yeah. In fact, while I was doing this work, I was really fortunate to come across a manuscript by Lee Boyle, who is a retired park historian, and Lee did yeoman work compiling the weather data for the entirety of the Philadelphia campaign. So this manuscript, which I hope gets published, it’s a great reference. It tells you the temperatures, the rainfall, the snowfall, observations on sunlight, you name it throughout the entirety of this campaign from when the British depart New York through the Battle of Monmouth. It’s a fantastic resource. But you’re right, the Valley Forge winter was marked by extremes and this is something that is part of the little Ice Age.

Climate change doesn’t mean that because the earth is getting colder or warmer, that it’s a constant. It means that it’s subject to often violent variations. And so what the soldiers encountered at Valley Forge was a freeze-thaw cycle, compounded by rain, compounded by snow. Sometimes snow was deep enough to run sleighs in Philadelphia, other days the rivers were overflowing and flooding roads. It just depended on the day it seemed. Sometimes the mornings are considered quite fine according to some officers’ diaries and journals. So it really depends. The weather fluctuates. And what this really does, though, because of the fluctuation, it turns these roads that were pretty bad to begin with, really into mud pits. And so marching along these muddy roads up to your ankles, sometimes calves in mud, what happens when it freezes? Well, this churned up mud now becomes spiky, frozen dirt, and that helps twist ankles. It makes it difficult going for horses. It plays hell on wagon suspension systems. So it really is a miserable existence because of that.

And as you pointed out, Jockey Hollow, the Morristown encampments, those are even worse in terms of the actual temperatures and the snowfall. But misery, I suppose, is contextual. You have to live through it to understand just how miserable it was, even though Valley Forge was not as bad in terms of temperature and snowfall as Morristown.

[00:44:18] **Liz Covart:** So in some ways our memory of Valley Forge is right in that it was a fairly miserable experience where soldiers were getting hurt, they were cold, it was hard to move supplies in and out of camp, and we didn’t even talk about disease. And that was also the winter where Washington inoculated his army for smallpox.



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[00:44:36] **Rick Herrera:** Absolutely. You've got a smallpox epidemic sweeping North America. Liz Fenn has written about that in *Pox Americana*. So Washington sees this and we've got to get everyone inoculated because sick soldiers, that detracts from the combat strength of the army. I need these soldiers ready to fight, so I've got to keep them healthy. But you're right, it's a miserable winter. When I look at it, though, and I think that when most Americans look at it, we often envision Valley Forge as the worst winter. And that's part of the American mythmaking, American memory. For listeners who have seen the Bugs Bunny cartoon, where the ice cream truck rolls into Valley Forge and Continentals' heads poke out of snowbanks, I think that's kind of the image that many of us have. And that also goes along with this mythic image of soldiers suffering in silence, when in fact, as the evidence more than amply demonstrates, this was a camp of activity. Despite the miserable weather, soldiers were doing the stuff that modern-day soldiers would recognize today. They're going out and patrolling. They're looking for intelligence on the enemy. They are looking for fights, at times. They are also exercising the writ of Continental government. They're also there to bolster Pennsylvania's government. So these soldiers, by their simple physical presence, were demonstrating the fact that there was a Continental Congress, there was a form of government for these rebelling colonies, these United States.

[00:46:15] **Liz Covart:** Well, we've covered the highlights in the lowlights of the Valley Forge winter, and we actually shouldn't joke about that, there was a lot of suffering during that winter and we should acknowledge that. But Rick, one event during Valley Forge that you cover in your book *Feeding Washington's Army* that we don't really talk or even hear about is the Grand Forage of February 1778. Would you tell us about the Grand Forage of 1778 and how that event fit into the Valley Forge winter?

[00:46:42] **Rick Herrera:** The Grand Forage of 1778 is something that was a historian's dream. Nobody had ever looked at it on its own terms, and you know, how often do we get that chance to find something that's really untouched? You know, back in the 1920s there had been a local antiquarian, Frank Stewart, who'd written a pamphlet highlighting Anthony Wayne's foraging activities in New Jersey and also the subsequent British activities that followed on. And that's used in probably every book that's written about Valley Forge. So looking at that, I thought there's got to be more in this. And so I began to dig much more deeply into it. And this Grand Forage of 1778 was the largest muscle movement of the Continental army while it was encamped Valley Forge. And in fact, the British response was the largest muscle movement of the British army while it was in Philadelphia garrison.

And so what this represented was really an act of desperation on Washington's part. He writes that the army is on the verge of dispersal or collapse. From the outset, he'd realized that holding Valley Forge was imperative. It was not only military necessity, it was political necessity, and politics and warfare cannot be separated. Washington understood this. Although he was, in my estimation, a mediocre tactician, he was becoming a superb strategist. Washington understood



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the close connection of the army and political regimes. He understood the connection of the army and how it had to subsist and exist at Valley Forge in order to challenge the British for control of this region. So he's between a rock and a hard place.

Washington issues orders to Nathanael Greene. Initially it was probably going to be Anthony Wayne because he was a local boy, he knew the area. But given the importance of the entire expedition, he goes to his right-hand man. And I know that fans of Hamilton are probably thinking, "no, wait, wait, Alexander Hamilton, that's his right-hand man!" Okay, calm down. It's actually Nathanael Greene. It's the apostate Quaker from Rhode Island. And Greene is Washington's best field commander. This mission is far too important to leave to a brigadier general in Washington's mind. So it's now going to a two-star, a major general. He gives Greene orders, Greene doesn't really believe in the expedition, but he's a good soldier. He salutes and says, "Thy will shall be done, boss," and Greene sets out with a vengeance and he'll march out with somewhere from 1,200 to 1,400 soldiers. And these guys represent some of the best-armed, best-equipped, and healthiest soldiers in the army. It's also very much an ad hoc command. So orders go out to the various brigades, "collect *X* number of soldiers for this." Unfortunately I don't have their names. I would love to come across the muster rolls for this expedition. These soldiers deserve to be known. But they go out, they've got four guns, probably six-pounders, I'm guessing, I haven't found the records recording the calibers, and they will head south into Chester County looking for these supplies. Greene's fortunate in that Howe did not respond. So he is left unmolested to try and go out and gather supplies.

Again, as is the case so often with studying the War for Independence, the records are either not available or are missing. I don't know the exact amount of supplies that he was able to gather, although he did write to his friend Henry Knox at the end of this expedition how proud he was of what he had been able to glean from Pennsylvania's countryside. That leads me to believe that it was not insubstantial. So Greene goes about this. He then decides that he's going to send Anthony Wayne across the river, and this is now Green taking this expedition and expanding it. Wayne will link up with John Barry. And John Barry is the seagoing equivalent of Anthony Wayne. They're both daring, they're both willing to take a risk. They are both focused on the mission. And the two of them just seem to hit it off well. Barry agrees to ferry Wayne's miniature brigade, all of about three hundred soldiers across the Delaware River to Salem, New Jersey. Then Wayne convinces Barry—I don't think it took much arm twisting—"Hey, I'd like you to set fire to the marsh hay." And so Barry sets fire to the marsh hay.

Why is he doing this? Well, it's not simple amusement, it's to distract the Royal Navy and to help perhaps delay or even prevent a descent of the British army upon him while he's in New Jersey. So Wayne will work his way through New Jersey. He establishes contact with Colonel Ellis soon to be Brigadier General Ellis of the New Jersey militia. Ellis provides him with incredible amounts of intelligence. Wayne is able to send out small parties to go out and contact local farmers, property holders. He even knows how many horses and cattle some of them have.



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That's how well developed the intel network was for Anthony Wayne. They'll March northward. It's finally, though, with Wayne in New Jersey that Howe decides to act and he dispatches the Light Infantry Brigade, the elite of the British army, to land at Salem and to go after Wayne. In fact, one of Howe's aides-de-camp records that they're there to have a slap at Mr. Wayne. They come within a hair's breadth of capturing him at Swedes' Church.

Wayne gets away. To his north, though, at present day, Camden, then Cooper's Ferry, another brigade has landed. Two battalions of the Black Watch, the 42nd Foot Highlanders, the Queen's American Rangers, probably the crack provincial unit under the command of John Simcoe—who, I hate to tell fans of *Turn*, was not a homicidal maniac. He was not a psychopath, sorry. So he's got that, and it seems that Wayne has now got the potential of being captured. He's able to elude it because what did the British army do? It fell back on its previous patterns of operation. It began foraging. It began looking for food and supplies that it needed, and it ignored its primary mission of having that slap at Wayne.

Here's a chance to administer a defeat to one of the leading generals in the Continental army, and the British dropped the ball. So Wayne is able to get through New Jersey and he's able to supply quite a bit of cattle, sheep, swine, you name it. As all of this is going on. Captain Henry Lee, who commands Fifth Troop, First Continental Light Dragoons, is doing his foraging in Delaware and Maryland, and he sends back hundreds of head of cattle, sheep, swine, you name it. And so Washington is able to plan at a centralized location, Valley Forge, but then send out trusted subordinates. And so as dramatic as Valley Forge is, and as, perhaps, I don't want to say pedestrian, but as uninteresting as feeding an army might sound, this entire expedition, this entire grand forage demonstrates in my mind the maturation of Washington as a commander, but also the maturation of Washington's command team and the trust that existed up and down, but also laterally.

This is a pretty sophisticated operation, and Washington has built the command team that can do it. He's also been cognizant of the importance of civil-military relations. Washington recognizes just how important private property is, how it's a foundation for individual political independence, individual economic independence. He understands how important it is to avoid offending people—because this was after all, a struggle for people's affections—while at the same time getting as many supplies as humanly possible to feed his soldiers. So it's an incredibly complex operation that really shines a light, I believe, on the maturation of the Continental army's leadership from Washington downward.

[00:55:08] **Liz Covart:** That sounds like a really tricky situation where you have to go out and gather supplies for your army, demonstrating that you have the force to take supplies if you need to compel people, but also balancing the need to keep everybody motivated to at least continue their support of the Continental army and the revolutionaries' cause. Like you don't want to turn



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the civilians against the army. So Rick, when we consider this task, what grade would you give Washington and the Continental army on the Grand Forage of 1778?

[00:55:40] **Rick Herrera:** I think overall I'd have to give the Continentals an *A* in terms of their ability to make up for what the formal supply system was unable to do for the soldiers, in terms of the Continentals' ability to avoid alienating any more people than it had to alienate, and, judging by the results, Washington soldiers succeeded. So I think they are well deserving of an *A*. In fact, I think I'm going to give them an *A* with honors.

[00:56:10] **Liz Covart:** High marks. Now as we think about the Grand Forage of 1778, what were the shorter and longer term impacts of this military operation? So how did having all of these supplies that they were able to gather impact Washington's ability to feed his army at Valley Forge? And what did the success of the grand forage mean for Washington's future work to supply and feed his army?

[00:56:32] **Rick Herrera:** Glad you asked that. The grand forage allows the army to survive until the spring. And this isn't to say that there weren't other foraging operations going on, but this is the largest one. The forage allows the army to maintain its position at Valley Forge until spring, until cattle can start coming down from New England.

And this means fresh food for the soldiers, which say so badly need. So it's a success in helping the Army maintain its position. It's a strategic success, and this, again, is where Washington really shines. It enables the army to keep that position and to prepare for its next engagement. Washington doesn't know what's going to happen. We, of course, know what takes place, and that's the Battle of Monmouth. But because the army's able to maintain its position, feed itself, get resupplied, rebuild its strength with recruits coming in, the army's able to march out and pursue Henry Clinton's retiring column as it's marching toward New York and Washington's able to have this one last fight in the middle colonies, in the middle states. Clinton also was able to have a fight, which he's looking for before he has to, uh, disperse upwards of half his strength to the West Indies. But it's a significant piece and an understudied piece.

[00:57:51] **Liz Covart:** We've had a pretty far-ranging conversation today, although we never did stray far from Valley Forge. But this leads me to wonder what is the one aspect of the winter at Valley Forge in 1777 and 1778 that you wish we better understood? How do you want us to walk away from this conversation Remembering the winter at Valley Forge?

[00:58:13] **Rick Herrera:** The myth that most of us Americans have grown up with, this myth of Valley Forge as a static place, as a place simply of suffering and virtue, I'd like people to understand Valley Forge as a hub of activity. I'd like them to realize that this was the home of an active field army, an eighteenth-century army, but an army doing the stuff that modern armies



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would today recognize. And to realize that it's more than just this place of suffering and virtue that our myths and our memory have constructed, but it's a hub of military activity and that Washington is doing many things that modern-day soldiers would understand. And so it's more than what we think it is. It's more than we've grown up to think it is.

[00:59:10] **Liz Covart:** We should jump into the "Time Warp." This is a fun segment of the show where we ask you a hypothetical history question about what might have happened if something had occurred differently or if someone had acted differently. In your opinion, Rick, what might have happened if George Washington had never ordered the Grand Forage of February 1778? How do you think the Continental army's encampment at Valley Forge would've ended differently? And how might the American War for Independence have ended differently?

[00:59:58] **Rick Herrera:** Oh boy. Had Washington not ordered the grand forage, the army would've faced two choices, dispersal or destruction. Washington, I believe, would've probably retired further west, somewhere toward Lancaster, somewhere toward Reading, falling back on his bases of supply. By doing so, that would have undercut all pretensions to Continental Congress's authority in southeastern Pennsylvania. It would've given the British free range within that area. That said, I think that the war would have still continued. The revolution was too far gone by 1777–1778. Britain's presence and ability to gain more loyalists was not going anywhere very quickly. It might have dragged the war out a little bit longer, but I think that the conclusion might very well have been the same. It would've just taken longer. Washington would've had a more difficult time recruiting troops. I suspect his army would've survived, but he would've really undercut, as I said, any pretensions to Continental authority in Pennsylvania. It would've weakened the Continental Congress's hand at saying that, "Hey, we are the government of this place."

[01:01:19] **Liz Covart:** As a military historian who has just covered the logistics of the grand forage, what aspect of military history are you researching and writing about now?

[01:01:28] **Rick Herrera:** I'm editing a collection of letters. This is something that I came across in grad school in 1997, and it's a collection of letters from a private in the Regiment of Mounted Rifleman, today's 3rd Cavalry Regiment, who enlisted in 1846, lands of Vera Cruz during the Mexican War, fights his way to Mexico City, comes back. He left a collection of thirteen letters, very long, and they're wonderful letters. They're at the New York Public Library, and I promised myself long ago that I would edit them for publication. I'm finally getting around to it today. In fact, I owe the University Press of Kansas the manuscript in June. So, let's hope that I can finish it on time. So I'm turning that in. That'll be one of my excursions into the nineteenth century. But I'm planning on returning to the American War for Independence in a couple of years by



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reexamining the 1778 and '79 campaigns for Savannah, which is really something that needs to be looked at again. It's been far too long.

[01:02:31] **Liz Covart:** Now, if we have more questions about the winter at Valley Forge and the grand forage, how can we pose them to you?

[01:02:37] **Rick Herrera:** You can find me with a simple Google search, either Rick Herrera or, uh, Ricardo, academia.edu as well as Google Scholar.

[01:02:46] **Liz Covart:** Ricardo Herrera, thank you for helping us investigate the winter of 1777–1778, and for telling us about the Grand Forage of 1778, which I don't think is an event that many of us had heard before our conversation.

[01:02:59] **Rick Herrera:** Hey, it's been my pleasure and I'm glad that very few people have heard of it. That means you have to go out and read about it, that means you've got to buy my book.

[01:03:07] **Liz Covart:** And where can we buy your book, Rick?

[01:03:08] **Rick Herrera:** Go to UNC Press. You can get it through Amazon as well. Ask your local book sellers to carry it, because, by golly, they should be carrying it.

[01:03:16] **Liz Covart:** Thank you, Rick.

[01:03:17] **Rick Herrera:** Thank you, Liz. It was a blast.

[01:03:20] **Liz Covart:** The winter at Valley Forge was a tough, cold winter, but it wasn't a winter where the men of the Continental army sat idle, wallowing in their misery. No, the winter at Valley Forge proved to be an active time for the Continental army. In fact, as Rick related, the encampment was a hub of military activity. During the winter of 1777 and 1778, The men of the Continental army worked to improve their condition and readiness for battle. As we heard from Rick, in February 1778, 1,400 men followed generals Nathanael Greene and Anthony Wayne out of the encampment to execute the grand forage to ease the army's supply problems. Most of the men in the Army stayed in camp and they improved their fighting strength and readiness. They went on patrols to gather intelligence, visited the doctor to be inoculated against smallpox, and participated in the drills administered by Baron von Steuben, who vowed to make the Continental army a ready and disciplined fighting force. We may have learned that the Valley Forge winter was a harrowing experience, and it certainly was a tough experience, but as Rick related, it wasn't an experience that saw the men idle in wallowing, freezing, starving misery.



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No. Valley Forge was about being proactive and improving the Army's readiness for the campaigns and battles ahead.

You'll find more information about Rick, his book *Feeding Washington's Army*, plus notes, links, and a transcript for everything we talked about today, all on the show notes page, benfranklinworld.com/348. Friends tell friends about their favorite podcasts. So if you want to make someone's New Year, please tell them about *Ben Franklin's World*. Production assistance for this podcast comes from The Omohundro Institute's digital audio team, Joseph Adelman, Holly White, Ian Tonat, and Dylan Holzer. Breakmaster Cylinder composed our custom theme music. This podcast is part of the AirWave Media podcast network. To discover and listen to their other podcasts, visit airwavemedia.com. Finally, you've been asking about Valley Forge for a long time, so what other topics would you like to know about now that we've covered Valley Forge? Tell me, liz@benfranklinworld.com.

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