

• The Story of Valley Forge •

The images are heartrending, dramatic and so powerful that they are embedded in the nation's historical consciousness:

Bloody footprints in the snow left by bootless men. Near naked soldiers wrapped in thin blankets huddled around a smoky fire of green wood. The plaintive chant from the starving: "We want meat! We want meat!"

These are the indelible images of suffering and endurance associated with Valley Forge in the winter of 1777-78.

"An army of skeletons appeared before our eyes naked, starved, sick and discouraged," wrote New York's Gouverneur Morris of the Continental Congress.

The Marquis de Lafayette wrote: "The unfortunate soldiers were in want of everything; they had neither coats nor hats, nor shirts, nor shoes. Their feet and their legs froze until they were black, and it was often necessary to amputate them."

A bitter George Washington — whose first concern was always his soldiers — would accuse the Congress of "little feeling for the naked and distressed soldiers. I feel superabundantly for them, and from my soul pity those miseries, which it is neither in my power to relieve or prevent."

The suffering and sacrifices of the American soldiers at Valley Forge are familiar, iconic images, but there is another side of the picture. Valley Forge was where a new, confident, professional American army was born.

Three months of shortage and hardship were followed by three months of relative abundance that led to wonderful changes in the morale and fighting capabilities of the Continental Army.

France would enter the war on the side of the new nation. Valuable foreign volunteers and fresh replacements would trickle into camp.

Most important, it was at Valley Forge that a vigorous, systematic training regime transformed ragged amateur troops into a confident 18th century military organization capable of beating the Red Coats in the open field of battle.