

Sons of Liberty Support the Cause Follow Us On Facebook

Main Menu

- Home
- George Washington
- Biography
- Battles
- Life and Times
- Washington's Guards
- Revolution by Month
- Founding Philosophy
- Audio
- FAQ

Support the Cause

Help support our work to bring American history back into the classroom!



We are a 501(c)(3) non-profit, recognized by the IRS. Your donation may be tax deductible.

Search the Archives

Enter keyword(s)

Search

December 1777

Written by Andrew Stough



The Buchanon	The Liverpool...
\$15.95	\$17.95

Editor's Note: This article was reprinted by Permission of the Gold Country Chapter No. 7 of the CSSAR and was slightly edited by the Sons of Liberty Chapter of the CSSAR

Events leading to the march into Valley Forge!

December 1777 spelled the beginning of serious winter cold. General George Washington had been concerned with two things; keeping British General William Howe from becoming complacent in Philadelphia and providing winter supplies and shelter for the Continental army. While there were some sorties to harass Howe, most of his endeavors were to obtain supplies for the coming winter. Despite assistance from Europe, the men were without blankets and pitifully clothed with many barefoot. Washington, forced by this lack of necessities and Congress' inability to supply them, revoked his policy on foraging. In an area heavily populated by Quakers and Loyalists unsympathetic to the "Cause of Independence" there was little if any willingness to sell. Nor, in this area, heavily foraged by Howe, there was little if anything left to take. In that day and time an army 'traveled on it's feet' and in this army so many were barefoot that this was the literal truth. So many men were without shoes with no possibility of replacement that Washington offered a reward of ten dollars to anyone who could produce a shoe substitute made from hides.

On December 4th the army had been encamped for a month on a hill near Whitmarsh Township, a few miles northwest of Germantown. The army wasn't a real danger to Howe, but, it might well have been a constant reminder of Washington's attack in the winter of 1776 on Trenton. In any event, Howe set out at midnight of December 4th with almost his total force to surprise the army encamped at Whitmarsh. At this point the dashing and daring figure of Captain Allan McLane appears, bursts into action, appears occasionally, is mentioned during the second winter at Morristown; then is heard from no more. McLane and 100 mounted men charged with reconnoitering the area, saw the British army on the move and warned Washington who increased his campfires to indicate a much larger force than he possessed. Not content with simply keeping watch on Howe's army, McLane resorted to violent charges on the forward flank but breaking off each attack before the enemy could get set for defense. These continuing charges, typical of the Plains Indians almost a century later, were successful in turning Howe's direction of march.

At 3 a.m. on December 5th, Howe rested his troops. He had reached a hill some three miles from the patriot army's campfires and at daybreak could easily see Washington's encampment. At 3 a.m. the campfires had appeared to be serving an unbelievably massive army of perhaps fifty thousand men, by daylight it's actual number could be seen. The ruse worked, Howe did not attack in darkness.

Washington was in a position to do battle as encamped. However, he had taken the precaution of striking his tents and sending the heavy baggage some miles to the rear. With the supply train secured, Brigadier General William Irvine with 600 Pennsylvanians were sent to test Howe but with disastrous results. Irvine was wounded and captured, his men driven back and routed. The armies then maintained their positions until the morning of December 7th, when Howe feinted a main attack at the center, while the actual main attack was an enveloping movement around one flank, the same tactic that had worked for him on Long Island and at Brandywine.

The most interesting thing about this battle was the rescue of General Joseph Reed. His horse was shot out from under him and abandoned by American troops, he was about to be bayoneted by British soldiers when he was rescued by none other than the daring McLane and his valiant horsemen.

Howe was the victor in the engagement to this point, but paused before assaulting a well defended hill camp, perhaps because he remembered too well his disastrous victory at Breed's Hill. He did not assault the well defended hill positions of the patriot army but reassembling his army, marched back to Philadelphia.

On December 11th, Washington broke camp and began to move the army across the Schuylkill River over a makeshift bridge. When several divisions were across, a large British foraging force appeared. The forward divisions were not prepared for an attack and were recalled and the bridge broken. With the river between them neither force could attack. Finally both went their separate ways, with Washington returning to Whitmarsh.

er not found

it's find the server at
er.amazon.com.

ie address for typing errors

On December 19th, the army entered Valley Forge. Some sources say this was just the place the army needed to keep an eye on Howe and to spend the winter training for the battles in the coming year. Other sources say that Washington's most favored plan was to move the army to Wilmington, Delaware. In Wilmington's more moderate climate an army could subsist and train more comfortably, it could be more easily supplied and troops at Wilmington would be healthier and less prone to sickness and disease which was the chief killer of Revolutionary soldiers. The only apparent drawback would be that it was not close enough to react swiftly to movements by Howe. Experience would indicate that Philadelphia would be a better choice for the winter Howe would only make a short stay there. The choice of Philadelphia was only for a short time. A reasonable distance from Philadelphia.

Ward states that Valley Forge was chosen as a compromise due to the hue and cry raised by Pennsylvanians who wanted the army to campaign all winter and not abandon them to the mercy of Howe. Washington was indignant that, knowing of the raggedness and lack of rations for the troops that they expected them to campaign all winter. He gave them a stinging response, asking who had said that he was going to abandon them to the mercy of Howe! He then accused them of failing to do their duty to supply and provision the army, yet fully expecting the army to fight in winter's cold without proper support from the very people who asked so much.

The upshot was a compromise; to remain at Valley Forge for the winter. A decision that might have been pleasing to Congress and the people of Pennsylvania and New Jersey but damned several thousand soldiers to be wasted by death in that long winter. While the remainder survived, all suffered for lack of food, clothing, housing and, last but not least, proper sanitation. When spring came, many of survivors were unfit for duty and those who suffered from debilitating illnesses or were crippled by over exposure or frozen feet had to be sent home; never to fight again.

In retrospect Washington and his generals were right about Wilmington which proves once again that no matter how noble the cause, human nature is always with us and that there will always be those who put self first.

The encampment at Valley forge in December comes at the end of the third long year of war.

References: Christopher Ward's "War of the Revolution" and Encyclopedia Britannica "The Revolutionary Years"

Free War Record Search 

1) Simply enter their name. 2) View their war record online!