

The Lady Who Saved Washington's Valley Forge Headquarters

Anna Morris Holstein

As a little girl growing up near present day Williamsport in Lycoming County, Pennsylvania, Anna Morris Holstein little knew that her name would someday be so closely connected to that of General George Washington and Valley Forge. Anna was a direct descendant of Captain Samuel Morris, of the First City Troop of Philadelphia. He fought with General Washington at the Battle of Princeton and at Trenton in the Revolutionary War.

In 1848 at twenty-four years old she married Major William Hayman Holstein and moved to the home he had waiting for her at their marriage near Bridgeport, Pennsylvania. She lived in that home for the rest of her life, but her interests and travels took her to many places in young America.

Her efforts to help raise funds to purchase and restore Mount Vernon, George Washington's home in Virginia, prepared her for her future effort to save Washington's Headquarters at Valley Forge.

But before then, the Civil War broke out between the Northern and Southern States. In 1862 Anna Holstein offered her services as a nurse for the Union Army (Northern), serving first at the Battle of Antietam. After the Battle of Gettysburg she was appointed head of nursing at Camp Letterman General Hospital. There she and her staff, including her husband, cared for three thousand seriously wounded men. A third of the wounded were soldiers from the Confederate Army, the opposing force from the Southern States.

She and her husband followed the Union Army in army wagons, sleeping under tents, enduring hardships and distress to alleviate the sufferings of the wounded and dying. The Holsteins also made great efforts to collect food and supplies from local residents and transport them to the battle fronts where they were desperately needed.

Anna Holstein and her husband continued to serve even after the close of the war. In January 1865, they went to the U.S. Naval Academy to see what could be done for the freed Andersonville prisoners who had been moved to Annapolis for care. She remained the hospital's head nurse until it closed. After the Civil War she wrote "Three Years in Field Hospitals" about her experiences as a nurse during the war.

Home School Day at Valley Forge National Historical Park, October 23, 2023
Valley Forge Park Alliance

As the country moved to the 100th anniversary (the “centennial”) of the Encampment of Washington’s Army at Valley Forge, a grand celebration was planned for June 19, 1878, exactly one hundred years after the army marched out of the Encampment. The Valley Forge Centennial and Memorial Association was founded, and Anna Holstein was made Regent (executive director) of the organization. She served in that office until her death. Her new mission was to excite the public to a true appreciation of the historic significance of Valley Forge where the army encamped in the winter of 1777-1778.

She worked with untiring zeal for the purchase of Washington’s Headquarters as a memorial for all time to come. She deserves the greatest credit for rescuing and restoring the Headquarters, but she and other members of the Association were deeply grateful to the men of the Patriotic Order Sons of America. Those men rallied to their support for payment of the balance of money owed on the property, thus securing the title and deed to the Centennial and Memorial Association.

As Regent of the Association, Mrs. Holstein presided with much grace and dignity at many public receptions and gatherings at Washington’s Headquarters. Her writing and her voice were ever active in enlisting the interest of the nation in Valley Forge.

Along the way she also organized the Valley Forge Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, and served as the first Regent of that chapter. In 1893 she served at the World’s Fair in Chicago as the Matron (director) of the Pennsylvania Building! An active member of the Historical Society of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, she was often speaking or writing on topics of local historical interest as well.

Anna Holstein was a sincere Christian; her whole life was a life of service. She loved America. She was a generous and intelligent woman, kind and gracious. Her absorbing life interests were patriotic, and found their fullest expression in the great service she rendered her country in her love for Valley Forge, and devotion in preserving its history.

She died on December 31, 1900, age seventy-six, and is buried alongside her husband at the historic Old Swedes Christ Church in Bridgeport, just a few miles east of Valley Forge down Route 23 along the Schuylkill River. There you can visit Anna and William Holstein’s gravesites and consider the lasting value of a useful life of service.

By Carris Kocher for the
Valley Forge Park Alliance

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Please circle the correct answer to the following multiple choice questions.

1. Anna Morris Holstein served as a nurse in the
 - a. American Revolutionary War 1775-1783.
 - b. Civil War Between the States 1861-1865.
 - c. World War I 1918-1919.
2. While working as a nurse with the Union Army, Anna Holstein and her husband William lived and slept in
 - a. hotels.
 - b. army wagons and tents.
 - c. private homes.
3. What particularly prepared Anna Holstein for her work saving Washington's Headquarters at Valley Forge?
 - a. Her work as a nurse
 - b. Her marriage to William Holstein, a military man
 - c. Her efforts to purchase and restore Mount Vernon
4. Which of the following did Anna Morris Holstein NOT do in her efforts to secure and restore Washington's Headquarters at Valley Forge?
 - a. Write letters and articles
 - b. Host events at the headquarters
 - c. Travel to Washington, D.C. to secure federal funding for the purchase
 - d. Gave speeches to many audiences
5. The Centennial and Memorial Association was formed to
 - a. Celebrate the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.
 - b. To organize observances of the turn of the century from 1899 to 1900.
 - c. To raise funds for the purchase and restoration of Washington's Headquarters at Valley Forge and to organize events for June 19, 1878, the 100th anniversary of when the Continental Army marched out of the Encampment.
6. The organization that provided money for the balance owed on the purchase of Washington's Headquarters was
 - a. the Valley Forge Heritage Society.
 - b. the Patriotic Order Sons of America.
 - c. the National Historic Preservation Alliance.
 - d. Valley Forge Park Alliance.

7. Which of the following descriptions does NOT describe Anna Morris Holstein?
 - a. Kind and generous
 - b. Patriotic
 - c. Hesitant, shy and lonely
 - d. Capable and intelligent
 - e. Considerate, dedicated to serving others
8. How old was Anna Holstein when she first volunteered as a nurse?
 - a. 25 years old
 - b. 38 years old
 - c. 43 years old
9. How many years of service did Anna Holstein give to preserving and restoring Washington's Headquarters at Valley Forge?
 - a. 50 years
 - b. 35 years
 - c. 22 years
 - d. 17 years
10. In addition to many letters and articles, Anna Holstein wrote a book about
 - a. the history of the American Revolution.
 - b. her experiences as a wartime nurse.
 - c. Washington's life at Mount Vernon.
 - d. her childhood growing up in Lycoming County, Pennsylvania.