“*A Winter Holyday*: Christmas at Valley Forge, 1777”

Valley Forge is often remembered in winter images: soldiers standing in snow without shoes, Washington in a cloak beside his horse, a suffering army transformed by discipline. Within that larger story, Christmas looms large in popular imagination—as if the entire encampment could be summed up in a single frozen holiday scene. The reality was more complicated. When December 25, 1777 arrived, the Continental Army had been at Valley Forge less than a week. The camp was still taking shape, food was scarce, and the army’s diverse religious traditions meant there was no single way to mark the day.

Christmas at Valley Forge was not a grand tableau but one hard winter day inside a much longer crisis. It is best understood through the fragments that survive: orders and letters from George Washington, diary entries from surgeons and junior officers, and the army’s own lists of names. Read alongside the Valley Forge Muster Roll (valleyforgemusterroll.org), these traces help reconstruct what “holyday” could mean in a camp where survival was the first priority.

A camp still being built

When the army marched into Valley Forge on December 19, 1777, it did not find a prepared cantonment; it began building one. Regiments were assigned ground, timber details went out, and men felled trees, dragged logs, and began laying out the grid of huts that would become their winter city. Washington offered cash rewards for the best, most efficient hut designs—an early attempt to spur both innovation and morale.

By Christmas, many units were still between tents and finished quarters. Some soldiers slept in partly built cabins open to the wind; others remained in worn canvas shelters while their huts rose around them. The Muster Roll can list which regiments were present in camp on December 25—Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Virginia, North Carolina, and others—but it cannot show the crooked chimneys, smoky interiors, or frozen hands that shaped that day’s experience. It simply marks that they were there.

Soldier’s Hut at Valley Forge

Who celebrated Christmas—and who did not

The Continental Army was religiously diverse, and that diversity shaped how (or whether) Christmas mattered at all. Among officers and enlisted men were Anglicans (soon to be Episcopalians), Lutherans, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Quakers, Jews, Black soldiers whose beliefs blended African, Christian, and sometimes Islamic traditions, and Native allies and auxiliaries.

For some of these communities, December 25 was a major feast day. For others—especially those in the strict Reformed and Quaker traditions—it was at best an ordinary winter workday, at worst a suspicious “popish” custom. Earlier in the century, New England Puritans had gone so far as to ban Christmas celebrations in the name of sobriety and discipline. That spirit lingered in many corners of the army.

This meant that on December 25, 1777, different units may have experienced the day in very different ways. An Anglican chaplain might have gathered officers for a brief service, reading familiar Scripture and prayers amid bare trees and raw timber. A Presbyterian company commander might have treated the date as one more Friday of fatigue duty and drill. For most, the line between holyday and workday blurred in the press of immediate

needs: food, warmth, and the slow work of turning Valley Forge into a functioning encampment.

“To complete their rations”: Christmas in the orderly books

Washington’s own words about the day are characteristically practical. On December 24, 1777, he ordered that “every regiment is to draw provisions, to complete their rations, for to morrow”—a simple directive that reveals how modest his expectations were. The most realistic “celebration” he could promise was the hope that each soldier might at least receive a full ration of food.

On Christmas Day itself, Washington continued his usual rhythm of correspondence. Among his letters was one to North Carolina’s Governor Richard Caswell, passing along news that a French ship had arrived in New Hampshire with arms and military stores—an early sign that foreign aid might begin to alter the balance of the war. Even on December 25, there was no pause in the work of securing supplies, managing relations with the states, and planning for the next campaign season.

Weather added to the mood. Snow fell around Christmas, and by December 26 several inches covered the ground. The scene that later artists would mythologize—a white landscape, a cloaked commander, a struggling army—did have a basis in fact. But in 1777, no painter stood by with a canvas; only the orderly books and letters recorded the day.

Hunger, firecakes, and “my Christmas frolick”

The most vivid accounts of Christmas at Valley Forge come from the rank and file. They show a holiday overshadowed by hunger.

- Surgeon Albigence Waldo, serving with a Connecticut regiment, had already described the army’s diet earlier in December: meat and bread when available; at other times, “firecake”—a paste of flour and water baked on stones or scrap iron. Firecakes could keep a man alive but offered little nourishment, and soldiers frequently complained that they made them sick.
- Around the time of the encampment’s first national day of thanksgiving—December 18, 1777—another medical officer, Jonathan Todd Jr., recorded that the army’s

"feast" was little more than beef, flour, and a small measure of rice per man. It was hardly a table to inspire holiday cheer. Thanksgiving passed into Christmas with stomachs still rarely full.

- On December 25, Lieutenant Samuel Armstrong, a New Hampshire officer, tersely summarized his own holiday in his diary. The regiment had no provisions. He was sent out to procure food, returned to camp, and was immediately ordered out again on scouting duty. He did not come back until late that night. With a soldier's dry humor, he labeled that long, hungry day "my Christmas frolick."

Taken together, these voices suggest that for many men, Christmas was not a feast but a continuation of scarcity. The Muster Roll's notations of "sick," "present," or "on command" hint at such experiences; the diaries fill in the human frustration behind the terse administrative categories.

Philadelphia feasts, Valley Forge firecakes

The contrast between Valley Forge and British-occupied Philadelphia sharpened the emotional edge of the holiday. Only a short distance downriver, British officers, loyalist families, and well-connected Philadelphians passed the winter with plays, balls, and elaborate dinners. Their social season would later culminate in the famous *Meschianza*—a grand May 1778 fête in honor of General William Howe—but even at Christmas their tables were far richer than anything seen in the huts on the Schuylkill.

American civilians in the countryside had their own modest celebrations. One Quaker diarist recorded a Christmas dinner that included roast turkey, puddings, and mince pies. Such meals were not universal in wartime Pennsylvania, but they were real enough to form a painful contrast with the army's rations.

For Continental soldiers, the knowledge that Christmas might mean a well-laid table for others did not necessarily translate into bitterness against civilians. Waldo, for example, used his observations to scold those Americans who complained about the war's inconveniences while enjoying relative comfort. Yet the juxtaposition remained stark: firecakes and thin broth at Valley Forge; better-fed households and British banquets in nearby Philadelphia.

Myth, memory, and the "Valley Forge Christmas"

Later generations overlaid this complicated reality with powerful symbols. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists and writers often distilled the entire encampment into a single winter image: Washington kneeling in the snow; an army shivering in rags; a lone, candle-lit hut on Christmas Eve. These stories and images drew on genuine hardships but rearranged them into a kind of American Passion narrative, with Christmas at Valley Forge standing in for sacrifice and eventual redemption.

In some versions, the encampment appeared as a crucible that produced a new, more disciplined army by the end of winter. In others, it served mainly as a backdrop for pious vignettes about Washington's personal faith. Either way, the messy diversity of religious practice in the Continental ranks, the unevenness of observance, and the simple fact that many soldiers spent the day on guard duty or foraging largely dropped out of view.

What the surviving records suggest instead is quieter. There may have been small religious gatherings in some regiments, extra efforts by officers to arrange a slightly better meal, or moments of song and camaraderie in the huts. There were also empty bellies, sore feet, and a sense among many that this Christmas was defined less by celebration than by endurance.

Christmas, names, and the Valley Forge Muster Roll

The Valley Forge Muster Roll offers a way to anchor these scattered voices in specific lives. It lists officers like Washington, Nathanael Greene, and Friedrich von Steuben—names that later artists would link to iconic Valley Forge imagery. It also records junior officers such as Samuel Armstrong and dozens of surgeons and surgeon's mates like Albigence Waldo and Jonathan Todd Jr. These are the people whose words allow us to reconstruct what December 25, 1777 felt like.

Behind each entry—"present," "sick," "on command," "deserted"—lay an individual whose holiday might have included a hurried prayer, a thin stew, a snow-covered march, or a lonely watch by a smoky fire. By pairing the Muster Roll's data with diaries, letters, and orderly books, it becomes possible to see "Christmas at Valley Forge" not as a single

scene, but as thousands of overlapping experiences, all unfolding in the same unfinished winter city.

George Washington and Gilbert du Motier, marquis de Lafayette at Valley Forge during the winter of 1777-78. Reproduction of a painting by John Ward Dunsmore, 1907.
Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

Places to explore the story

- Valley Forge National Historical Park (PA) – Interprets the encampment on the original ground. Winter programs, reconstructed huts, and wayside exhibits help visitors imagine the conditions soldiers experienced around Christmas 1777.
- Valley Forge Park Alliance – Valley Forge Muster Roll (online) – A digital roll call of the encampment, listing regiments and individuals present on December 25, 1777, and throughout the winter. An essential tool for linking specific names to the broader story of the encampment (valleyforgemusterroll.org).
- Library of Congress & Founders Online – Repositories for Washington's letters, including his correspondence from December 1777 that reveals how little the work of command paused for holidays.

- Published diaries and orderly books – Editions of journals by Albigence Waldo, Jonathan Todd Jr., Samuel Armstrong, and other Continental officers preserve firsthand details of rations, weather, and daily duty around Christmas at Valley Forge.

Christmas at Valley Forge did not offer the army much in the way of festivity. Instead, it required soldiers and families to carry their own memories of home and faith into an encampment still under construction, where the best gift many could hope for was a full ration and a sturdy roof. Seen through the Muster Roll and surviving firsthand accounts, that winter holyday becomes not a single iconic picture, but a mosaic of endurance at the heart of the Revolution.