Children of the Encampment: The Smallest Witnesses

"We have more to do than to fight— we must also feed and clothe."
— A Continental officer's diary, Winter 1778

Smoke, damp wool, and the scrape of a wooden bucket on frozen ground: for some children, Valley Forge was not a painting in a textbook but the texture of daily life. They were there because their mothers were there—women who followed the army and worked for it as laundresses, cooks, seamstresses, nurses, and sutlers. The rolls did not name the young ones who fetched water or watched kettles, but the camp's own shape—its huts, its hospital network, its routines—left room for them. In a winter remembered for soldiers' endurance, they shared the cold. (National Park Service, "Women and Children at Valley Forge")

A City of Families, Not Just Soldiers

When the Continental Army marched into Valley Forge on December 19, 1777, it brought with it more than 12,000 soldiers—and several hundred civilians. Among them were between 250 and 400 women and an unknown number of children. The army's records tracked food and powder, not families, yet the rhythm of domestic life is everywhere implied: laundries near creeks, cooking fires between huts, cries of infants beneath the roll of drums. The "city of huts" was, in part, a city of families. (NPS, "What Happened at Valley Forge?")

What the Record Preserves

Children appear only obliquely in the record. Washington's correspondence occasionally mentions "the multitude of women" or "followers with children" who complicated movement, though his tone softened over time as he recognized their utility. In later years, pension narratives such as Sarah Osborn Benjamin's described children fetching water or carrying wood—mundane chores transformed by hardship. While Benjamin's recollections refer to later campaigns, they illuminate a pattern that applied here as well: children as silent contributors to the army's survival. (Founders Online: Washington to Alexander McDougall, 17 June 1778) (National Archives Pension File W.15355, Sarah Osborn Benjamin)

Work Small Enough to Miss

In huts roughly 14 by 16 feet, families lived within arm's reach of soldiers. Children carried water from Valley Creek, tended fires, stirred kettles, and helped wash garments stiff with frost. These tasks, though small, were essential. Laundry curbed lice and disease; cooked meals boosted morale; a clean shirt was both hygiene and dignity. The work of childhood fit into the camp's fragile system of order—unrecorded but indispensable. (Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence* (2005))

Risk, Near and Constant

Disease was the encampment's most lethal enemy. Between March and May 1778, nearly 2,000 soldiers died—mostly from typhoid, dysentery, and pneumonia. For the wives and children who lived alongside them, the threats were no less real. Washington's February 1777 inoculation order established smallpox control, but civilian followers were often outside that protection. The general hospitals at Yellow Springs, Uwchlan (Red Lion), and French Creek formed an incomplete safety net. Families lived between the official and the improvised, between the surgeon's tent and the wash fire.
(Founders Online: Washington to William Shippen Jr., 6 February 1777)
(AMEDD Center of History & Heritage: "Continental Army Hospitals in Pennsylvania")

The Domestic Map of a Winter Army

Archaeology fills the silences. Excavations at Valley Forge reveal hearths blackened by soot, child-sized pottery fragments, and clusters of household debris—pins, thimbles, toy marbles—among musket flints and shot. These remnants trace domestic lives lived within a military geometry. The hut rows and "streets" laid out by regiment became home to soldiers and families alike, a structured wilderness of cooking pits and washing stones. In every sense, Valley Forge was a *working village* where domesticity met endurance. (NPS, "Archaeology at Valley Forge")

A Father and Son—and the Others Beside Them

In the Valley Forge Muster Roll appear fathers and sons—some, like the Humphries family of Virginia, enduring illness together. Next to such names lies blank space, the unrecorded presence of wives and children. Their stories survive in inference: a boy cutting kindling, a girl standing knee-deep in water scrubbing shirts. They were not enlisted, but they served. The Revolution was fought by households as much as by armies. (Valley Forge Park Alliance, *Valley Forge Muster Roll Project*)

Why Tell This Story Now

As the nation approaches America 250, the children of the encampment remind us that the Revolution was not an abstraction of ideals but a lived ordeal of families. Their small labors—quiet, necessary, sustaining—reveal another dimension of patriotism: the courage of persistence when history wasn't watching. (America250PA: Valley Forge 250 Initiative)

Supplementary Reading & Resources

Primary and Interpretive Sources

- National Park Service – *Encampment Life at Valley Forge*
- Founders Online – Washington's Correspondence on Camp Followers

- Revolutionary War Pension Narrative: Sarah Osborn Benjamin (W.15355)
- AMEDD Center of History & Heritage – Continental Hospitals in Pennsylvania

Scholarly Works

- Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence* (2005)
- Nancy K. Loane, *Following the Drum: Women at the Valley Forge Encampment* (2009)
- Holly Mayer, *Belonging to the Army: Camp Followers and Community during the American Revolution* (1996)

Local & Public History

- Valley Forge Park Alliance – *Valley Forge Muster Roll Project*
- Historic Yellow Springs – *The Hospital at Yellow Springs*
- Chester County Historical Society – Revolutionary Era Resources

*Interpretive Note***:** Because the names of children and many women were never recorded, this essay reads across official silences—using archaeological evidence, comparative pension accounts, and Washington's own correspondence to reconstruct a credible portrait. All claims derive from verifiable records or cautious inference noted as such.