"From Winter Quarters to the Road to Yorktown": Valley Forge and the Washington–Rochambeau March

Valley Forge is usually remembered as an ending: the winter when the Continental Army endured, reorganized, and then marched away in June 1778 to a somewhat hazier "rest of the war." In reality, that encampment was a beginning. The men who learned to stand in the snow along the Schuylkill—officers and rank-and-file alike—would carry that discipline all the way to the allied march of 1781 and the final siege at Yorktown. The Washington–Rochambeau Revolutionary Route is, in many ways, the long, narrow road that connects those two memories.

Valley Forge as proving ground

Roughly 12,000 soldiers and several hundred camp followers entered Valley Forge in December 1777 and built an improvised city of huts and earthworks along the ridges. They endured a winter of hunger, disease, and political uncertainty, but they also absorbed a new way of soldiering under Baron von Steuben's drills and reforms. The National Park Service still describes the encampment as "one of the most famous episodes of the American Revolution," precisely because it transformed Washington's army from a loose collection of regional forces into a more coherent national one. (The Kid Should See This)

That transformation was not abstract. It was carried in the bodies and memories of particular men who would later march south: George Washington and his staff, artillery chief Henry Knox, adjutant general Alexander Scammell, and common soldiers like Joseph Plumb Martin—whose later memoir would insist that the true heroism of the war lay in "endurance of poverty, cold, hunger, boredom, confusion, and mismanagement," not in clean, romantic combat. (Commonplace)

The 680-mile road from Newport to Yorktown

The Washington–Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail commemorates some 680 miles of roads and waterways used by Washington's Continental Army and Rochambeau's French expeditionary force in 1781. (Wikipedia)

French troops left their long encampment at Newport in June 1781, moving in four divisions. They passed through:

- Rhode Island – Newport to Providence; then inland via Waterman Tavern in Coventry along what is now Plainfield Pike, a narrow, stone-walled road segment still recognizable from 18th-century descriptions. (Wikipedia)
- Connecticut – Into Sterling and Plainfield, then west through Windham and Bolton, across the Connecticut River at East Hartford, through Wethersfield and Farmington, over the rough roads near Waterbury and Middlebury, and across the Housatonic into Newtown and Danbury. French officers complained of "detestable" rocky hills in this stretch.
- New York – Through Ridgebury into Westchester County, joining Washington's army near Philipsburg (Hartsdale) on the Hudson. From there, the combined forces crossed at King's Ferry between Stony Point and Verplanck's Point.

- New Jersey and Pennsylvania – Washington's and Rochambeau's columns threaded different but parallel paths through towns like Mahwah, Paramus, Springfield, Chatham, and Princeton, converging on Trenton and crossing the Delaware back into Pennsylvania, then through Philadelphia.
- Delaware, Maryland, Virginia – South through Wilmington, Elkton, Head of Elk, Baltimore, and across the Potomac into Virginia, finally reaching Williamsburg and the trenches of Yorktown in September 1781. (National Park Service)

It was the largest coordinated allied march of the war—crossing roughly 45 counties and 200 towns—yet for generations it remained overshadowed by the endpoints: Valley Forge and Yorktown. (The Washington Post)

Valley Forge men on the road to Yorktown

What gives this road its meaning is not just the map, but the continuity of the people on it—men whose names appear on the Valley Forge Muster Roll and again in accounts of the 1781 campaign.

- George Washington – Commander-in-chief at Valley Forge, he now led a more seasoned, professional army in close cooperation with Rochambeau. The habits of inspection, discipline, and staff coordination developed in winter quarters were essential to managing a joint march of thousands of men, horses, wagons, and artillery pieces over 14 weeks.
- Henry Knox – Present at Valley Forge as chief of artillery, Knox later oversaw the transport of heavy guns along the route and their placement in Yorktown's siege lines. His Valley Forge period had already seen him working to standardize artillery training; by 1781 his guns and gunners played a decisive role in battering British positions and forcing Cornwallis's surrender. (Valley Forge)
- Alexander Scammell – A Harvard-educated officer who served as adjutant general at Valley Forge, responsible for army paperwork and discipline, Scammell later commanded a light infantry detachment that acted as the vanguard on the march south. At Yorktown he led troops in the advanced positions before being mortally wounded while reconnoitering British lines—the highest-ranking American officer killed during the siege. (Wikipedia)
- Joseph Plumb Martin – A Connecticut private who survived Valley Forge's hunger and cold, Martin marched again with the allied army, this time as part of the Corps of Sappers and Miners at Yorktown. In his memoir he remembered both the starving winter—"We were absolutely, literally starved," he later wrote—and the back-breaking labor of digging siege trenches that brought the war to its climax. (CT Insider)

They stand for thousands of others whose paths are less documented but no less real: men who cut timber for huts along the Schuylkill and later shouldered muskets along Plainfield Pike, who drilled under Steuben's barked commands and later marched past curious New England farm families watching French uniforms file by.

Why the route faded—and why it matters now

There are practical reasons this story slipped into the background. The roads they used have been widened, straightened, or buried under highways; their campsites lie under suburbs, parking lots, and industrial parks. Yorktown's drama and Valley Forge's hardship made for clearer, more compact stories than a 680-mile logistics operation. The French role in the war, diplomatically and militarily, was also long under-emphasized in American public memory.

Yet the Washington–Rochambeau Route fills in something essential. It shows that the victory at Yorktown did not appear out of nowhere; it was the product of years of institutional learning and human endurance that began in places like Valley Forge. When we match a muster-roll name to a surviving road segment or town, we are literally tracing the movement of particular lives across the landscape—from winter quarters to the last major siege.

For America 250, the trail offers a way to connect local communities—Newport, Plainfield, Danbury, Trenton, Baltimore, countless others—to the larger story of the Revolution. It reminds us that the "Valley Forge generation" did not simply endure and go home. They kept walking: through New England hills, New Jersey crossroads, and Mid-Atlantic port towns, carrying the hard lessons of that winter all the way to the allied lines outside Yorktown, where the war's military end finally came into view.

Why this matters for America 250

Seen from Valley Forge and from the long road to Yorktown, the Revolution stops looking like a handful of famous battles and starts looking like a chain of commitments that had to be renewed, tested, and revised over time. The soldiers who shivered through the winter of 1777–78 did not yet know there would be a French army on American soil three years later, or that they would one day march beside them toward a decisive siege on the Virginia coast.

What held those threads together was not inevitability, but work: the reform of the Continental Army at Valley Forge under Washington, von Steuben, and a maturing officer corps; the slow, often fragile diplomacy that brought France into the war; and the capacity of ordinary soldiers and communities to endure disruption, privation, and loss. (National Park Service)

For America 250, that story feels important. The Washington–Rochambeau march is, in some ways, Valley Forge made visible on the landscape: a trained, allied force moving through real towns—Providence, Plainfield, Hartford, Danbury, White Plains, Princeton, Trenton, Philadelphia, Head of Elk, Baltimore, Annapolis—on its way to Yorktown. Remembering that route reminds us that victory depended on alliances, on logistics, on local communities, and on a Continental Army that had been painfully forged in the winter of 1777–78. (Wikipedia)

Places to visit (and why they connect)

- Valley Forge National Historical Park (PA**)** – The core winter encampment where Washington's army reorganized, von Steuben drilled the troops, and the Continental Army emerged as a more coherent, professional force. The park's interpretation and the Valley Forge Muster Roll project help identify who was actually there and what units later fought at Monmouth and Yorktown.

- Washington–Rochambeau National Historic Trail (RI–CT–NY–NJ–PA–DE–MD–VA) – A 680-mile National Historic Trail marking the march of the Continental and French armies from Newport to Yorktown. Key stops include the French camps around Providence and Plainfield, CT; the Hudson Valley camps near modern Greenburgh/Philipsburg; and the line of march through Princeton, Trenton, Philadelphia, Head of Elk, Baltimore, Annapolis, and south into Virginia.
- American Revolution Museum at Yorktown (VA) – Interprets the siege that completed the arc from Valley Forge's winter to the final allied victory. Exhibits and outdoor programs place Washington, Rochambeau, Lafayette, and their troops on the ground where the war's decisive campaign ended.
- Local WRRR sites along the route – In New Jersey and Pennsylvania especially, county-level markers trace the actual roads used by Continental troops: Raritan Road and Morris Avenue in Union County; the King's Highway through Princeton and Trenton; and the crossing sites on the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers. (Hudson River Valley)

Works consulted (selected)

Valley Forge & Continental Army

- National Park Service, *"What Happened at Valley Forge?"* Overview of the encampment, supply crisis, reforms, and troop numbers. (National Park Service)
- American Battlefield Trust, *"Winter at Valley Forge."* Narrative of conditions, von Steuben's training, and the army's transformation. (American Battlefield Trust)
- George Washington's Mount Vernon, *Digital Encyclopedia: "Valley Forge."* Context on leadership, international volunteers (Lafayette, Steuben), and the army's maturation. (George Washington's Mount Vernon)

Training, doctrine, and legacy

- History.com, *"Valley Forge."* Focus on von Steuben and the development of *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States* ("Blue Book"). (HISTORY)
- Museum of the American Revolution, *"Baron von Steuben's Regulations."* Short interpretive piece on the manual's impact through the War of 1812. (Museum of the American Revolution)

Washington–Rochambeau march

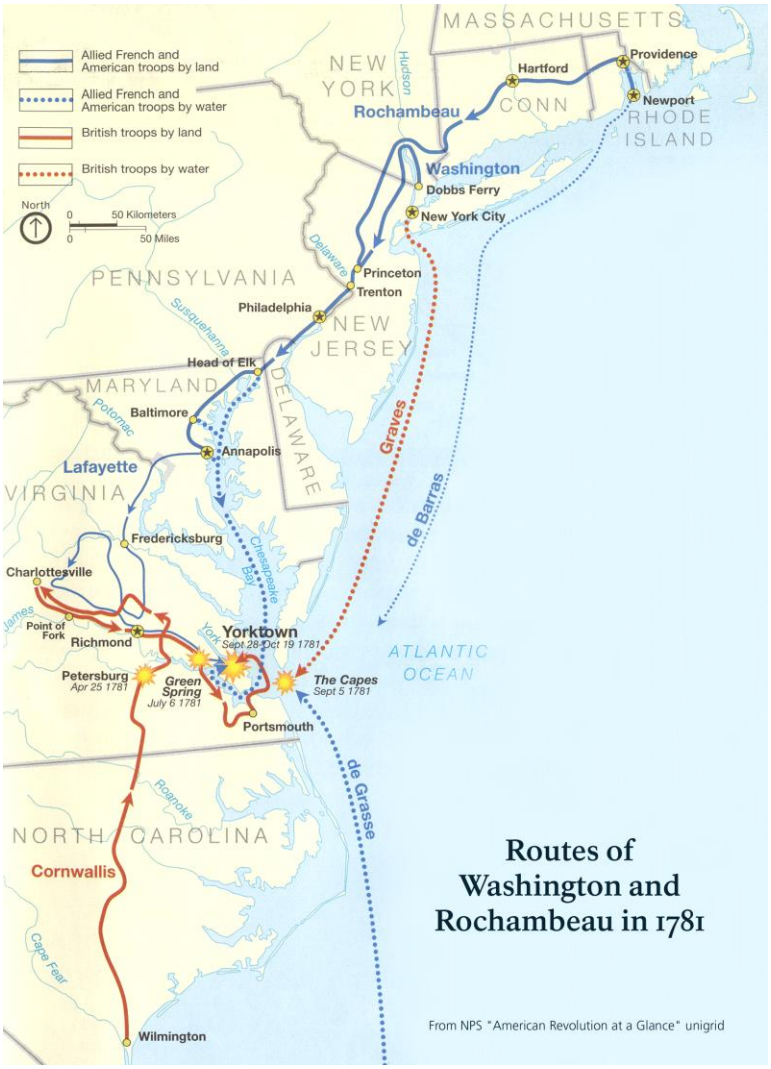
- Wikipedia, *"Washington–Rochambeau Revolutionary Route."* Useful high-level overview of the 1781 march from Newport to Yorktown and the modern National Historic Trail. (Wikipedia)
- National Park Service, *Washington–Rochambeau Revolutionary Route* (history & trail pages). March chronology, division routes, and interpretive themes linking the Franco-American alliance to Yorktown. (National Park Service)

- American Battlefield Trust, *"Marching to Victory: The Washington–Rochambeau National Historic Trail."* Accessible narrative tying specific dates and locations to the allied movement south. (American Battlefield Trust)
- Hudson River Valley Institute, *"Revolutionary War Routes in the Hudson Valley."* Details on the joint march through New Jersey, Philadelphia, Head of Elk, Baltimore, and on toward Yorktown. (Hudson River Valley)

Synthesis & recent interpretation

- NPS / Washington–Rochambeau trail studies and significance statements (esp. "Historical Narrative" PDFs) for detailed analysis of how Valley Forge, Franco-American cooperation, and the 1781 campaign fit together. (NPS History)

French map of the route to Yorktown, 1782 [Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress]



[NPS map of the W3R Route]