# Making Camp a City: Chester County's Civilians and the Encampment's Reach

The winter encampment at Valley Forge transformed Chester County from a quiet agricultural landscape into one of the busiest logistical hubs of the American Revolution. When Washington's army arrived in December 1777, they did not simply occupy open fields—they occupied a community. Farms, forges, mills, and meetinghouses in surrounding townships became an intricate support system for a winter army of roughly 12,000 soldiers plus several hundred civilians. Civilians were not spectators; they were participants.

From ironmasters and millers to Quaker farmers, enslaved laborers, and women who baked bread or laundered for rations, the war passed directly through property lines. Valley Forge was both an encampment and an economy—a temporary city assembled from the resources, labor, and endurance of Chester County's residents. (National Park Service)

**A county transformed by war**

Chester County stood at a strategic crossroads after the fall of Philadelphia in September 1777. Valley Forge offered high ground within a day's march of the city and access to supply routes stretching west toward Reading and Lancaster; the site was also embedded in a working landscape of mills and an iron community founded in the 1740s. On December 19, 1777, the army began building what park historians call the "fourth-largest city in the colonies"—about 1,500 log huts and roughly two miles of fortifications—superimposed over farms and lanes.

**Civilians in uniform and without it**

"Making camp a city" required a county's worth of skills:

- Millers and bakers along local creeks supplied flour and bread via the commissary and contractors—part of the broader provisioning crisis Washington described to Congress. (Founders Online)
- Ironworkers and smiths in the region (e.g., Valley Forge/Mount Joy works, Warwick, and other plants in the Potts network) kept wagons rolling and hardware repaired, echoing the army-wide reliance on artificers. (Wikipedia)
- Teamsters and farmers hauled wood and forage; Washington's orders also tasked officers with protecting supply routes from British raiding out of occupied Philadelphia. (Founders Online)
- Women laundered, cooked, sewed, and nursed for rations and sometimes wages; NPS estimates ~250–400 women at Valley Forge. (National Park Service)

Each interaction blurred the line between civilian and soldier. The encampment drew on a county-scale economy to function day to day. (For the best modern analysis of how an army

lived off—and with—its neighbors, see Ricardo A. Herrera's *Feeding Washington's Army*.) (The University of North Carolina Press)

**Faith and forbearance: the Quaker dilemma**

A large Quaker population faced a crisis of conscience. Pacifist testimony forbade bearing arms, yet neutrality proved difficult under military requisitions and foraging by both armies. Petitions and compensation claims from meetings and individual landholders followed in the war's wake, a pattern typical across southeastern Pennsylvania. (Herrera details the tangle of receipts, IOUs, and delayed payments that defined the winter's "grand forage.")

**Industry, slavery, and the hidden workforce**

Valley Forge's very name comes from the Mount Joy/Valley Forge ironworks established in 1742; the British burned portions of the works in 1777, but the industrial footprint remained. Like other mid-Atlantic iron enterprises, the Potts network drew on mixed labor systems—free, indentured, and enslaved—in the decades before and during the war. NPS interpretation notes that Potts used free workers, indentured servants, and slaves in these industries; scholarship on Pennsylvania iron plantations (and nearby Hopewell Furnace) documents enslaved labor at regional furnaces and forges in the 18th century. (National Park Service) This labor—often unnamed—hauled timber, made charcoal, repaired wheels, and shod horses. Making camp a city meant these workers, too, built the Revolution's infrastructure.

**Lines of care: hospitals and homesteads**

Civilian buildings in Chester County became extensions of the army's medical network. During the encampment, general hospitals near Valley Forge operated at Yellow Springs, Uwchlan (Red Lion), and French Creek—documented in Brig. Gen. Lachlan McIntosh's April 27, 1778 "Report of the Camp Hospitals." (Founders Online) Dr. Samuel Kennedy first oversaw Yellow Springs; when the new complex rose on physician-owner land, Dr. Bodo Otto took charge—arrangements attested in regional medical histories and local research. (ACHH)

Washington's February 6, 1777 smallpox inoculation order shaped the broader health regime, but families living on the margins of that system still faced disease, crowding, and exposure. (Founders Online)

**Aftermath and memory**

When the army marched out in June 1778, the landscape was exhausted. Park histories note the devastation of fields and woodlots by hut building and fuel cutting, followed by surprising recovery in the 1780s. (NPS History) Many locals pursued compensation for requisitioned goods and damages—often slowly settled, if at all—while communities rebuilt mills, fences, and herds.

(Again, Herrera's study is the best single guide to how receipts and repayments lagged the army's needs.)

Today, the encampment's reach is still legible: fieldstone farmhouses used as hospitals, Quaker meetinghouses in use, mill seats along Valley Creek, and archaeological sites that mark civilian work areas. Valley Forge became shorthand not just for military endurance, but for cooperation between an army and the county that sustained it. (National Park Service)

**A living county in a winter army**

To call Valley Forge a "city" is not poetic exaggeration. It was a planned municipality of log architecture and civic function—roads, markets, workshops, hospitals, headquarters. Chester County residents made it possible, provisioning from their fields, crafting with their hands, and caring in their homes. As America marks 250 years, recognizing this network of civilian labor—farmers, artisans, enslaved and free workers, women and children— restores balance to the story. The endurance we remember at Valley Forge was not only military. It was civic, communal, and local. (National Park Service)

**Sources & Further Reading**


- NPS—What Happened at Valley Forge? (encampment scale; "fourth-largest city," huts, fortifications; population) — (National Park Service)
- NPS—The Women Present at Valley Forge (250–400 women; Norton & Geyer) — (National Park Service)
- Founders Online—George Washington to Henry Laurens, Dec. 23, 1777 ("Starve—dissolve—or disperse"; supply crisis) — (Founders Online)
- Founders Online—(McIntosh) "A Report of the Camp Hospitals," Apr. 27, 1778 (Yellow Springs, Uwchlan/Red Lion, French Creek) — (Founders Online)
- AMEDD Center of History & Heritage—Army Hospitals in Pennsylvania / Gillett ch. 4 (Yellow Springs as the largest/most important nearby general hospital; winter 1777–78) — (ACHH)
- NPS—Valley Forge Cell Phone Guide (transcript) (Potts used free, indentured, and enslaved labor; postwar forge rebuilt) — (National Park Service)
- NPS—Hopewell Furnace: African Americans at Hopewell (regional iron industry and slavery) — (National Park Service)
- Valley Forge pre-encampment iron community & farms (overview; Mount Joy/Valley Forge works) — (Wikipedia)

- Ricardo A. Herrera, *Feeding Washington's Army* (UNC Press overview; "Grand Forage of 1778" & provisioning) — (The University of North Carolina Press)
- Founders Online—Washington to Captain Stephen Chambers, Feb. 27, 1778 (protecting supply lines around Philadelphia) — (Founders Online)
- NPS—Valley Forge National Historical Park histories (landscape use, devastation, recovery) — (NPS History)

**Side Bar Info: Local Connections - Chester County's Civilian Landscape**

**1. Yellow Springs (Historic Yellow Springs Village)**

- Role: Site of a principal general hospital complex during the 1777-78 winter. Run by Dr. Samuel Kennedy and later Dr. Bodo Otto, it treated hundreds of soldiers evacuated from camp.
- Today: A preserved 18th-century village with surviving hospital and springhouse foundations.
- Learn more: Historic Yellow Springs Official Site – History
  *(Primary documentation: Founders Online, "Report of the Camp Hospitals," Apr 27 1778 → link)*

**2. Valley Friends Meetinghouse (Tredyffrin Township)**

- Role: Quaker meeting situated less than two miles from the encampment. Members suffered property losses when fences and barns were dismantled for fuel and lumber.
- Today: Still an active Friends Meeting, open for visitors by appointment.
- Learn more: Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society – Valley Meetinghouse

**3. Knox's Quarters / David Potts Jr. House (Valley Forge NHP)**

- Role: Home of ironmaster David Potts Jr., later used by Brig. Gen. Henry Knox, Chief of Artillery. Symbolizes the intersection of Chester County industry and Continental logistics.
- Today: Restored within Valley Forge National Historical Park.
- Learn more: NPS – Valley Forge National Historical Park: Knox's Quarters

**4. Hopewell Furnace National Historic Site (Berks/Chester County line)**

- Role: Sister iron plantation to the Potts family's Valley Forge works; documents the labor system—free, indentured, and enslaved—that produced cannon, shot, and ironware for the Revolution.

- Today: Operated by NPS with original charcoal stacks, furnace, and workers' houses.
- Learn more: NPS – Hopewell Furnace NHS

**5. Chester County History Center (West Chester)**

- Role: Repository of petitions, receipts, and diaries from residents who interacted with the army—essential for studying how the encampment reshaped local society.
- Today: Open research library and exhibits on the Revolutionary era.
- Learn more: Chester County History Center

**Optional Additions**

- Valley Creek Ruins (site of the burned forge, within NPS boundaries). NPS Valley Forge Map
- Mount Joy Forge Site (interpreted in park signage).