

“The Camera Arrived Late”: Photographs of People Who Were at Valley Forge

Valley Forge is usually remembered through winter hardship and later transformation—an encampment mapped in hut lines, preserved in orderly rows of names, and imagined through paintings and prints. But the faces remain elusive. Photography arrived decades too late. The winter of 1777–78 was long past by the time a camera could fix a human likeness on a plate or a paper mount. That mismatch in timelines matters: it means that, for most people who lived and labored at Valley Forge—soldiers, officers, artisans, teamsters, and camp followers—no photograph can exist.

And yet, a very small number of people associated with Valley Forge lived long enough to be photographed. Identifying them requires the same discipline the Valley Forge Muster Roll Project applies to the encampment itself: separating what is documented from what is merely repeated. The goal is not to assemble a gallery of “Revolutionary War veterans,” but to identify the rare instances in which a photographic likeness taken from life can be tied, credibly and specifically, to the Valley Forge encampment.

Valley Forge in the age before photography

The first practical photographic process—the daguerreotype—was publicly announced in 1839 and came into wider use during the 1840s, followed by ambrotypes and tintypes in the 1850s, and the mass-produced carte de visite in the 1860s. By then, a Valley Forge soldier who had been twenty years old in 1777 would be in his late eighties. That outcome was possible, but uncommon. A private who entered the huts as a teenage drummer or boy soldier had better odds of surviving into the age of photography—but even then, the likelihood of leaving behind an identified portrait was slim.

This chronological reality helps explain why Valley Forge memory is so often visualized through later art. Paintings and engravings could be created (and recreated) long after the winter passed; photography could not. When a photograph connected to Valley Forge does exist, it is therefore significant not because it is romantic, but because it is statistically improbable.

The rare exception: Alexander Millener

The clearest, best-documented photographic likeness taken from life that can be tied directly to Valley Forge is Alexander Millener (sometimes rendered as “Maroney” in nineteenth-century sources). In 1864, the photographer-publishers N. A. and R. A. Moore produced a portrait of Millener as a centenarian Revolutionary War veteran—an image now held by the Library of Congress.

What makes Millener unusually important for Valley Forge history is not simply that his photograph survives, but that a near-contemporary biographical account explicitly places him at the encampment. In *The Last Men of the Revolution* (1864), E. B. Hillard writes of Millener: “*He was at the encampment at Valley Forge.*” That sentence anchors a photographic face taken from life to a specific Revolutionary War place and season—an evidentiary combination that is exceedingly rare.

- https://archive.org/details/gri_33125012930976 (see Hillard’s biographical entry for Millener)
- The Library of Congress reinforces this connection in its interpretive discussion of “*The Last Men of the Revolution*,” noting Millener’s recollections of his Revolutionary War service, including Valley Forge.
<https://blogs.loc.gov/picturethis/2013/11/the-last-men-of-the-revolution/>
- <https://www.americanrevolution.org/alexander-milliner/>

Hillard’s text presents Millener as a Revolutionary War drummer associated with Washington’s Life Guard. That matters for interpreting what “service” looked like at Valley Forge, because drummers were not decorative; they were part of the army’s daily operating system. Based on standard Continental Army practice (and consistent with why a commander’s guard would need musicians), a drummer attached to headquarters or a guard detail would have been used for drum calls that regulated camp life—signals for assembly, guard mounting, alarms, and the rhythms that kept an encampment functioning. In other words: less “battlefield glory,” more routine, discipline, and communication, the connective tissue of an army trying to survive the winter.

Alexander Millener and the Valley Forge Muster Roll Project

Alexander Millener does not appear as a named individual in the Valley Forge Muster Roll Project database, which is derived primarily from surviving Continental Army muster rolls for the winter of 1777–78. Like many enlisted men—particularly drummers, musicians, and members of guard details—Millener’s service is not preserved in those records.

His connection to Valley Forge instead rests on a near-contemporary published account written during his lifetime, which explicitly places him at the encampment. The Muster Roll Project’s methodology—prioritizing documentary evidence, clearly labeling the limits of surviving records, and distinguishing between archival proof and interpretive material—provides the framework for using Millener’s photograph responsibly.

A related but distinct case: Brevet Major John Van Dyk

Brevet Major John Van Dyk represents a different category of visual evidence. Van Dyk’s service at Valley Forge is documented through his role in the Continental Artillery, and his biography is presented by the Valley Forge Muster Roll Project.

<https://valleyforgemusterroll.org/brevet-major-john-van-dyk/>

A tintype image associated with Van Dyk appears in the Project’s materials and preserves his likeness. However, this image is not a photograph taken from life. It is a photographic reproduction of an earlier likeness, likely copied from a painted or engraved source. As such, it should not be interpreted as a camera-captured image of Van Dyk himself.

The distinction matters. Van Dyk’s image is valuable as evidence of how Valley Forge participants were visually remembered and reproduced in the nineteenth century, but it does not belong in the same evidentiary category as Millener’s life photograph.

What this shows about evidence—and why it matters

It is relatively easy to locate nineteenth-century photographs of men identified as “Revolutionary War veterans.” It is far more difficult to identify photographs taken from life of people who can also be documented as having been at Valley Forge. Millener matters because his record crosses both thresholds: a surviving life photograph and a specific Valley Forge assertion in a near-contemporary published account.

That distinction offers a useful lesson for the Valley Forge Muster Roll Project as a whole. Valley Forge was not merely a symbol or an idea; it was a real place inhabited by particular people. When even one of those people can be encountered through a photograph taken from life—creased with age, unmistakably human—the muster roll becomes less abstract. The winter quarters stop being “the army,” and become this face, and the thousands of names behind it.

Images (and why they connect)

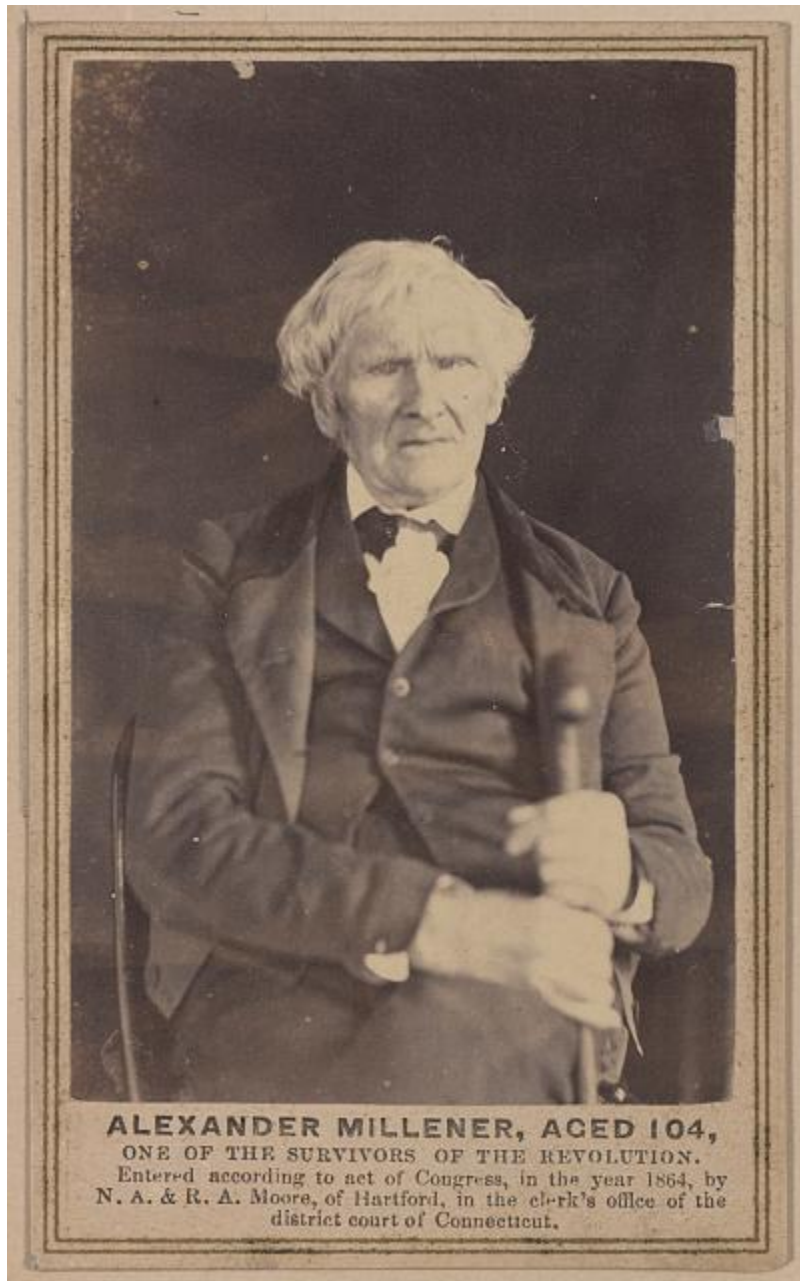


The Last Men of the Revolution (1864 composite)

Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division

<http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsca.35341/>

Rights Advisory: No known restrictions on publication. Originally published in 1864 by N. A. & R. A. Moore.



Alexander Millener, aged 104 (1864) — Library of Congress

Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division

<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2013645056/>

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Brevet Major John Van Dyk (tintype reproduction of earlier likeness)
Valley Forge Muster Roll Project; Courtesy of the Westchester County Historical Society.
<https://valleyforgemusterroll.org/brevet-major-john-van-dyk/>