

## “Faces at Winter Quarters”: Valley Forge, Charles Willson Peale, and the Art of an Encampment

Valley Forge is usually remembered in images: barefoot soldiers in snow, Washington brooding beside his horse, a ragged army transformed by drill. Yet very little contemporary art was actually made *in* camp. The winter of 1777–78 left more muster rolls, orders, and diaries than canvases. That is precisely why the few works of art tied directly to Valley Forge—and the many later pictures inspired by it—matter so much. They offer rare faces, gestures, and visual traditions that can be set alongside the Valley Forge Muster Roll’s long lists of names. ([valleyforgemusterroll.org](http://valleyforgemusterroll.org))

### **An artist in the huts**

No artist was closer to the Continental Army in this period than Charles Willson Peale. A Maryland-born painter and officer in the Philadelphia militia, he followed the army in the field, painting miniatures and larger portraits while also serving in uniform. During 1778, Peale spent much of the first six months in camp at Valley Forge, observing, socializing with, and painting officers of the Revolutionary army. ([The American Revolution Institute](http://The American Revolution Institute))

Peale’s war-time portrait miniatures were practical as well as sentimental. Painted in watercolor on thin ovals of ivory and set in small metal cases, they were portable, quick to execute, and easy to hide from enemy plundering. Late in life, Peale recalled that he “did more in miniature than in any other manner,” precisely because these small likenesses could be tucked safely away. Over the course of the Revolution he painted more than 130 miniatures, including likenesses of George Washington, Henry Knox, and Nathanael Greene.

Among the most important camp images are the Peale miniatures now preserved at Anderson House, home of the American Revolution Institute. One portrays William Truman Stoddert of Maryland, a young officer in the Continental Line; the other depicts Colonel George Baylor of Virginia, commander of the Third Continental Light Dragoons. Both were painted in 1778.

The Baylor miniature is explicitly documented as having been painted at Valley Forge in the spring of that year. In it, Peale shows a twenty-six-year-old cavalry officer in a white coat with blue facings and silver epaulettes, his hair carefully dressed, the background restrained. The sitter is the same George Baylor who appears in the Valley Forge Muster Roll as colonel of the 3rd Light Dragoon Regiment—a unit that entered Valley Forge with 127 men and left the encampment later that winter. Here, the muster roll’s terse line “Colonel George Baylor” becomes a living face, painted in camp while the dragoons were still encamped on the Schuylkill.

Peale’s miniatures were intimate objects meant for family, but they now serve a broader public function. They show the Continental Army as its officers wished to be seen—not as scarecrows in snowbanks, but as young professionals in carefully tailored uniforms. When read alongside

muster rolls and service records, these portraits help reconstruct the human texture of Valley Forge's command structure.

### **Washington and the Valley Forge “type”**

If Peale's miniatures put individual officers in a locket, his larger portraits helped fix the public image of Valley Forge's leadership. His various portraits of Washington, done from life in the late 1770s, provided a template for what later collectors and catalogers would simply call the “Valley Forge type”: Washington in uniform, wrapped in a cloak, often associated with the hardships of the winter camp even when the specific painting was not executed there. ([National Portrait Gallery](#))

That visual “type” was endlessly copied. An offset lithograph titled *Washington at Valley Forge* in Cornell University's Political Americana collection reproduces a 1779 painting by Peale and carries the story forward into the age of mass printing. ([Cornell University Library](#)) Copies after Peale circulated in private collections and public galleries, until it became difficult to separate specific canvases from the broader icon.

Today, Valley Forge National Historical Park often illustrates its online profiles of Washington's generals—the men who shared that winter in camp—with Peale portraits of Friedrich von Steuben, Nathanael Greene, and the Marquis de Lafayette. ([National Park Service](#)) Most of these paintings were completed after the encampment and in other locations, but their reuse in Valley Forge contexts shows how deeply Peale's imagery has become part of the park's visual language. The same artistic eye that recorded officers in the huts later shaped how Americans picture the leadership of the encampment as a whole.

### **Women at Valley Forge and a rare female face**

The encampment at Valley Forge included more than soldiers. Park historians estimate that roughly 250 to 400 women—wives, laundresses, nurses, sutlers—lived in and around the winter quarters, performing essential labor in exchange for rations and, in some cases, wages. ([National Park Service](#)) Martha Washington's presence at headquarters is well known, but lesser-known figures like Jane Norton, Mary Geyer, and many unnamed camp followers also endured the winter and appear in surviving records.

What the historical record rarely provides, however, is a face. Unlike officers, these women were seldom painted from life. That is what makes any alleged Valley Forge portrait of a woman so intriguing—and so important to handle carefully.

A catalog record in the Frick Art Reference Library preserves one such tradition, associating a female sitter's portrait with Valley Forge and attributing the original to Charles Willson Peale. The surviving work is a later copy after a now-lost painting, and the note that the original was “begun at Valley Forge” rests on older, not fully verified testimony. The attribution remains uncertain, but the very existence of the claim is telling. It suggests that at some point a viewer, a family, or a cataloger believed this woman's likeness belonged to the story of the encampment, perhaps as an officer's wife or another gentlewoman in camp.

Whether or not future research confirms the Valley Forge origin, the portrait points toward a larger truth: women at the encampment were not faceless abstractions. They were individuals whose names appear in orderly books, ration lists, and occasional court-martial records—and whose images may yet be hiding in family collections or miscataloged canvases. Bringing even a single possible female face into the Valley Forge story widens the frame beyond the familiar row of generals.

### **Later visions of Valley Forge**

Most of the images commonly associated with Valley Forge today were painted long after the war. In 1883, Philadelphia artist William B. T. Trego exhibited *The March to Valley Forge, December 19, 1777* at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Inspired by a somber passage in Washington Irving's *Life of Washington*, Trego showed exhausted soldiers trudging through snow behind a bleak, resolute Washington. ([Museum of the American Revolution](#)) The painting quickly became one of the most iconic commemorative works of the Revolution, reproduced in prints, textbooks, and even modern wall art. ([Wikimedia Commons](#))

More recently, artist Don Troiani's painting *General George Washington during the Philadelphia Campaign, 1777* has been used by the Valley Forge Muster Roll to illustrate its online home page. Troiani's hyper-detailed, historically researched style places Washington and his officers in the landscape of the campaign season that culminated in the winter encampment. In this way, nineteenth- and twenty-first-century artists extend the visual record of Valley Forge, imagining scenes that no contemporary painter recorded on a large scale, but that grow directly out of the written evidence.

### **Art, names, and the Valley Forge Muster Roll**

The Valley Forge Muster Roll—maintained by the Valley Forge Park Alliance—began as a painstaking effort to compile the names, units, and basic data for everyone encamped at Valley Forge for at least one day between December 19, 1777, and June 19, 1778. It remains a living research project, continually updated as new documentation comes to light.

Artwork associated with Valley Forge does something complementary. A miniature like Peale's *George Baylor* connects directly to the muster roll's entry for the 3rd Light Dragoons, transforming a regimental heading and a colonel's name into a young Virginian officer whose hair, uniform, and expression were painted in camp. Later images of Washington at Valley Forge, though commemorative rather than documentary, give visual form to the march-in and the hardship that period diaries describe. And if the tradition behind a female portrait "begun at Valley Forge" can ever be confirmed, it would add a rare woman's face to a narrative where women are usually glimpsed only in prose.

Taken together, these works of art and the Muster Roll's database form a kind of double record. The roll tracks presence and organization; the portraits and paintings suggest demeanor, status, and how contemporaries—and later generations—wanted Valley Forge to be remembered.

Both are necessary to see the encampment as a community of individuals rather than a single frozen legend.

### **Places to see the art (and why they connect)**

Valley Forge National Historical Park (PA) – Interprets the winter encampment on the ground where it occurred and uses Peale portraits and later paintings in its online exhibits on Washington and his generals.

American Revolution Institute at Anderson House (DC) – Holds Peale’s miniatures of William Truman Stoddert and George Baylor, including the Baylor portrait documented as painted at Valley Forge in the spring of 1778. ([The American Revolution Institute](#))

Museum of the American Revolution (Philadelphia) – Houses William B. T. Trego’s *March to Valley Forge, December 19, 1777*, one of the most influential postwar images of the encampment and its approach. ([Museum of the American Revolution](#))

National Portrait Gallery (Washington, DC) – Catalogs numerous images in the Washington “Valley Forge type” tradition and other portraits after Charles Willson Peale that shape the modern visual memory of the encampment. ([National Portrait Gallery](#))

Valley Forge Muster Roll (online, Valley Forge Park Alliance) – A digital roll call of the encampment, listing units such as Baylor’s 3rd Light Dragoons, and a central point of connection between surviving images and the soldiers and families they depict. ([valleyforgemusterroll.org](#))

### **Works consulted (selected)**

*Peale at Valley Forge & portrait miniatures*: American Revolution Institute, “Two Portrait Miniatures by Charles Willson Peale.” Background on Peale’s wartime miniatures, his time in camp at Valley Forge, and the Stoddert and Baylor portraits. ([The American Revolution Institute](#))

#### *Valley Forge, women, and visual culture*

- National Park Service, “The Women Present at Valley Forge.” Overview of the estimated 250–400 women at the encampment and their roles as nurses, laundresses, and sutlers. ([National Park Service](#))
- American Battlefield Trust, “Women at Valley Forge.” Narrative essay on officers’ wives and other women in camp, with attention to daily labor and survival. ([battlefields.org](#))

#### *Washington at Valley Forge and later images*

- National Portrait Gallery, Catalog of American Portraits entry, “George Washington (Valley Forge type).” Documentation of a Washington portrait after Peale in the Valley Forge tradition. ([National Portrait Gallery](#))
- Cornell University Library, Political Americana Collection, “Washington at Valley Forge.” Lithographic reproduction of a Peale-based image that helped popularize the Valley Forge icon. ([Cornell University Library](#))

- Museum of the American Revolution / Michener Art Museum, entries on William B. T. Trego's *March to Valley Forge*. Discussion of the painting's 1883 exhibition, controversy, and enduring influence. ([Museum of the American Revolution](#))

*Valley Forge Muster Roll project*: Valley Forge Muster Roll, Valley Forge Park Alliance. Project description, criteria for inclusion, and interpretive overview of the encampment's command structure. ([valleyforgemusterroll.org](#))

## IMAGES



Charles Willson Peale, Samuel B. Webb (miniature). Webb-Deane-Stevens Museum. Image via Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain



Charles Willson Peale, James Madison (miniature), 1783. Library of Congress. Image via Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain



Charles Willson Peale, Miniature portrait of George Washington, 1775–76. Library of Congress. Image via Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain



Charles Willson Peale, George Washington, ca. 1777. Watercolor on ivory. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Public Domain