

## **Under Providence: Faith and Religion at Valley Forge**

When the Continental Army entered Valley Forge in December 1777, it did not arrive as a uniform body of believers gathered around a single creed. It came as a hungry, sick, improvised army of New England Congregationalists, Virginia Anglicans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, Quakers, German Reformed believers, and others, accompanied by camp followers, civilians, and people whose religious lives did not fit neatly into the categories later patriotic memory preferred. In that winter city of huts, religion was not ornamental. It was language, discipline, consolation, and structure. It helped make suffering legible. And above all, it was filtered through one word George Washington used again and again: Providence.

### **Washington's Religious Language: Providence More Than Piety**

Washington's religious language was typically broad, restrained, and public-facing. He most often referred not to God in explicitly doctrinal terms, but to "Providence," "the Almighty," or the "Supreme Being." Mount Vernon's scholarly overview of Washington's religion notes that he most often used the name "Providence," and that he understood history as shaped by a divine power that was active but not always fully knowable to human beings. That framework matters at Valley Forge, because the encampment was a place where events could easily have seemed random: shortages, disease, snow, mud, and deep uncertainty about whether the army could survive intact. Washington's providential language offered a way to understand hardship as trial rather than chaos. ([George Washington's Mount Vernon](#))

That was not passive fatalism. Washington did not use Providence as an excuse for inaction. He drilled, reorganized, disciplined, and demanded. But he also believed that outcomes finally rested in a larger order beyond human control. Mount Vernon's Washington materials preserve his view that "the determinations of Providence are always wise, often inscrutable," a phrase that captures his cast of mind well. At Valley Forge, that outlook allowed endurance to become moral as well as military. Men still had duties — to serve, obey, improve, and persevere — but they did so under a providential horizon.

### **Religion in the Routine of Camp**

Religion at Valley Forge was not only private reflection. It was institutional. On May 2, 1778, Washington ordered that "divine Service be performed every Sunday at 11 o'clock in those Brigades to which there are Chaplains; those which have none to attend the places of worship

nearest to them.” He also required officers, “by their attendance,” to “set an Example to their men.” Then came the line that later generations remembered: “While we are zealously performing the duties of good Citizens and soldiers, we certainly ought not to be inattentive to the higher duties of Religion. To the distinguished Character of Patriot, it should be our highest Glory to add the more distinguished Character of Christian.” ([catalog.mountvernon.org](http://catalog.mountvernon.org))

That order reveals several things at once. It shows that chaplains were present but unevenly distributed; that religious observance was built into military routine; and that Washington regarded religion as connected to discipline and example, not only inward belief. Faith in camp meant sermons, parade-ground order, and visible participation by officers. Religion was part of how the army tried to become coherent. At Valley Forge, worship was one of the practices by which a collection of regiments became more nearly an army.

### **Fast Days, Humiliation, and National Meaning**

Congress also framed the Revolutionary struggle in providential terms. On March 19, 1778, while the army remained at Valley Forge, the Continental Congress proclaimed a day of “fasting, humiliation and prayer.” It called on Americans to acknowledge “the righteous dispensations of Divine Providence,” confess sin, and ask divine favor for the country and its arms. Washington then ordered that the day be “religiously observed in the Army” and instructed the chaplains to prepare appropriate sermons. ([Library of Congress](http://Library of Congress))

This was not merely ceremonial. It shows how religion linked the army’s suffering to the larger political meaning of the war. Valley Forge was not understood only as a logistical crisis. It was presented as a moral test. The language of fasting and humiliation mattered because it turned the winter encampment into a moment of collective self-scrutiny as well as endurance. In that framework, military hardship could be interpreted as chastening, purification, or preparation under Providence rather than only mismanagement or misfortune. That was a very eighteenth-century way of understanding public events, but it was also a powerful one.

### **Not One Faith, but Many**

Later memory often makes Valley Forge look religiously uniform: Protestant, austere, overwhelmingly Anglo-American, centered on Washington’s private prayer. The actual encampment was more varied. The National Park Service notes that those present at Valley Forge included Episcopalians, Lutherans, Congregationalists, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Quakers, Mennonites, and others. Even among Christians, observance differed

widely. Christmas, for instance, mattered in some traditions and hardly at all in others; many New England Protestants did not celebrate it in the way later Americans assumed.

The camp was broader still. The Park Service also notes that some individuals at Valley Forge practiced Judaism, including Dr. Philip Moses Russell. Among the more than 700 Patriots of African descent present at the encampment, some likely practiced Islam or African religious traditions unrelated to Christianity. Native men were also present, including individuals from communities such as the Mashantucket Pequot; some had Christian affiliations, while others likely carried forms of belief and practice that do not fit neatly into Anglo-American church labels. Valley Forge, then, was religiously serious but not religiously simple. It contained a Christian public culture, but also a more plural spiritual reality than the familiar paintings suggest.

### **Black Patriots, Native Presence, and the Limits of the Record**

The documentary record is much better at preserving the official religious language of Washington and Congress than the spiritual lives of ordinary soldiers. That imbalance matters. The National Park Service estimates roughly 700 to 720 Patriots of African descent at Valley Forge, many in New England units. Yet the surviving sources usually record their names, pay, or service more readily than their inner religious worlds. The same is true for Native participants. Their presence is clearer than the details of their worship. As with women and children in camp, one often has to read against the silences. ([National Park Service](#))

Even so, those silences tell us something important. They remind us that Valley Forge was not a tidy moral tableau peopled only by white Protestant soldiers. It was a wartime society. Its religion included official sermons, camp prayers, and congressional fasts, but also Jews, Black soldiers whose beliefs may have reached beyond Christianity, Native participants, and civilians whose religious commitments complicated military life, especially in nearby Quaker communities. Faith at Valley Forge belonged to a mixed world, not a single devotional tradition.

### **Quakers Nearby, Conscience Under Pressure**

The region around Valley Forge included a strong Quaker presence, especially in southeastern Pennsylvania. Their testimony against war put them in an especially difficult position during the encampment. Washington's army needed wood, food, labor, transport, and space; nearby civilians, including Quakers, often found themselves caught between military necessity and conscience. This local context mattered religiously because Valley Forge was not sealed off from the faith communities around it. It sat inside a landscape where religious principle could mean

participation, service, refusal, accommodation, or grievance. The nearby meetinghouses and farms formed part of the encampment's moral geography.

### **Prayer, Legend, and Historical Memory**

No discussion of faith at Valley Forge can avoid the famous image of Washington kneeling in the snow. But historians have long noted that this image belongs more to later national memory than to secure contemporary evidence. Library of Congress prints such as *The Prayer at Valley Forge* and *Gen. Geo. Washington in prayer at Valley Forge* show how powerfully that scene entered nineteenth-century American imagination. They are historically valuable, but mainly as evidence of how Americans wanted to remember Valley Forge: as a founding scene of prayer, humility, and providential destiny. ([The Library of Congress](#))

That does not mean religion was absent. Quite the opposite. It means that the real religious life of Valley Forge was richer and less theatrical than the legend. Faith was present in Sunday worship, fast days, chaplains, sermons, moral language, officers' example, and the providential interpretation of events. The myth of Washington praying alone in the snow simplifies that reality into one iconic image. The history is more interesting. It shows religion not merely as a moment of solitary piety, but as a set of beliefs and practices that helped organize an army and interpret a winter of suffering. ([catalog.mountvernon.org](#))

### **Why It Matters**

As America approaches the 250th anniversary of the Revolution, faith at Valley Forge deserves to be understood in full. It was not simply a matter of Christian devotion in the abstract, nor only a later patriotic myth about Washington's prayer. It was a lived reality shaped by chaplains, public worship, congressional fasts, moral discipline, and the language of Providence. It also unfolded in a camp that was denominationally varied and, in important ways, religiously plural. Valley Forge was a place where belief helped sustain endurance, where Providence helped explain uncertainty, and where the Revolution's moral vocabulary took on visible form in a city of huts. To recover that complexity is to see the encampment more clearly: not as a sentimental tableau, but as a hard, crowded, spiritually charged wartime community.

## **Sources & Further Reading**

### **Primary and institutional sources**

- George Washington, General Orders, 2 May 1778, on Sunday worship and religion in camp. ([catalog.mountvernon.org](http://catalog.mountvernon.org))
- *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 19 March 1778, proclamation for a day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer. ([Library of Congress](http://Library of Congress))
- Mount Vernon, “George Washington and Religion.” ([George Washington's Mount Vernon](http://George Washington's Mount Vernon))
- National Park Service, “Christmas at Valley Forge.” ([National Park Service](http://National Park Service))
- National Park Service, “Patriots of Color at Valley Forge.” ([National Park Service](http://National Park Service))

### **Memory and Visual Culture**

- Library of Congress, *The prayer at Valley Forge*. ([The Library of Congress](http://The Library of Congress))
- Library of Congress, *Gen. Geo. Washington in prayer at Valley Forge*. ([The Library of Congress](http://The Library of Congress))
- Library of Congress, *Washington and Lafayette at Valley Forge*. ([The Library of Congress](http://The Library of Congress))
- J. Torres, *The Memory of Valley Forge in American Consciousness*. ([NPS History](http://NPS History))

### **IMAGE:**

*The Prayer at Valley Forge*, engraving after Henry Brueckner, published 1889. This well-known later image reflects the growth of the Washington-at-prayer legend in American memory more than it documents a verified scene from the encampment itself. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division. ([The Library of Congress](http://The Library of Congress))



THE TRAYOR AT VALLEY FORD

*From the Original Painting by Philip James de Loutherbourg*