

WILLIAM ALEXANDER – Major General, Lord Stirling

By: Andrew Stevenson

America's Revolutionary cause drew to it many unlikely figures, and few were more unusual than William Alexander, better known as Lord Stirling. Born in New York in 1726 or 1727, he came from a prominent family, was well educated, and served as a supply officer during the Seven Years' War, where he first met George Washington. He later pursued a claim to the Scottish earldom of Stirling. Even after the House of Lords rejected that claim, he continued to style himself "Lord Stirling," giving the Revolution one of its most curious personalities: a self-fashioned aristocrat who became a major general in a republican army. Yet behind the title there was real substance. He helped equip troops at his own expense, earned Washington's trust, and became one of his most loyal senior officers.

Stirling first fixed his place in Revolutionary history at the Battle of Long Island in August 1776. There, in one of the war's darkest early defeats, he helped save Washington's army from destruction. As British and Hessian forces closed in, Stirling ordered much of his command toward the difficult crossing at Gowanus Creek and remained with Maryland and Delaware troops in a desperate rear-guard action near the Old Stone House. The National Park Service notes that these men, later remembered with the legend of the "Maryland 400," repeatedly charged a much larger enemy force, suffering terrible losses but buying critical time for the rest of the army to escape to Brooklyn Heights. That stand became one of the defining moments of early American courage, and it permanently linked Lord Stirling with the Maryland troops whose sacrifice helped preserve the Revolution in its infancy.

That is what makes Stirling's later presence at Valley Forge so meaningful. Long Island showed him in a moment of battlefield crisis; Valley Forge showed him as part of the harder work of sustaining the army through hunger, exhaustion, and uncertainty. By the winter of 1777–78 he was no longer merely the gallant commander of a rearguard. He was one of Washington's senior generals, commanding Stirling's Division in camp. The Valley Forge commemorative record still preserves that fact in the Pennsylvania Brigade monument, which identifies "Stirling's Division" under Major General Lord Stirling during the encampment.

The best evidence of Stirling's importance at Valley Forge comes in his own words. During the winter supply crisis, he wrote to Washington: "The Complaints of the want of provisions and forage are become universal and Violent, every officer speaks of it with dread of the probable Consequences." That is an especially valuable line because it strips away later sentimentality and reveals how serious the situation actually felt to the men in command. Valley Forge was not only a place of patriotic suffering. It was a test of whether the Continental Army could remain a functioning military force at all. Stirling understood that the danger lay not merely in British arms, but in shortages of food and forage, collapsing morale, and the fear that the war effort might simply fail from within.

Stirling also played a practical role in the camp's military organization. In Washington's general orders of January 15, 1778, Lord Stirling was named alongside Nathanael Greene and the Marquis de Lafayette to consult with the engineers on the defensive works at Valley Forge and to help see that the necessary labor was carried out. That detail matters because it shows he was not a decorative grandee or a mere survivor of earlier campaigns. He was involved in the actual business of making Valley Forge defensible. The encampment was a military position as much as a symbol, and Stirling was part of the effort to hold it together.

His role during the Valley Forge period was also political. Stirling was one of Washington's most loyal lieutenants, and he helped expose the intrigue later known as the Conway Cabal, the effort by dissatisfied officers and politicians to weaken Washington's standing after the disappointments of 1777. That loyalty is part of his importance. At Valley Forge, the American cause needed more than endurance in the ranks. It needed steadiness in the high command. Stirling provided that steadiness.

The connection between Long Island, the Maryland regiment, and Valley Forge is therefore deeper than simple chronology. At Long Island, Stirling and the Marylanders helped save the army physically. At Valley Forge, he helped sustain it structurally: commanding a division, helping oversee defenses, and warning Washington about the worsening supply crisis. One episode was dramatic and bloody; the other was administrative, political, and slow-moving. But both were essential. The Revolution survived first because brave men bought time in battle, and then because the army endured long enough to become more disciplined and more cohesive. Stirling stands at both ends of that story.

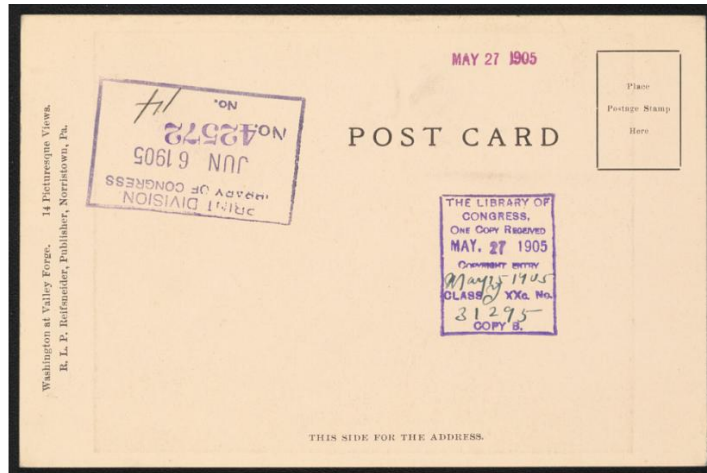
After Valley Forge, Stirling continued to serve in important campaigns, including Monmouth, where the reorganized Continental Army showed how far it had come since the disasters of 1776 and 1777. He remained a trusted senior officer in the war's later years, though his health suffered badly, and he died in January 1783 before the peace was fully secured. He never became as famous as Washington, Greene, Lafayette, or Knox, but that may be part of why he is worth remembering. Stirling was one of those substantial Revolutionary figures without whom the larger names would have had much less to command.

What remains most interesting about Lord Stirling is the contradiction at the center of his life. He was proud, ambitious, and attracted to rank and display. He was also brave, loyal, and genuinely useful. In another setting he might have been dismissed as merely vain or eccentric. In the Revolution, those qualities were absorbed into something larger. He became one of the many imperfect but indispensable men who made independence possible. And at Valley Forge especially, he appears not as a romantic curiosity, but as a serious commander confronting the grim realities of war with open eyes.

Sources:

- [Mount Vernon, "William Alexander, Lord Stirling" \(George Washington's Mount Vernon\)](#)
- [National Park Service, "The Maryland 400" \(National Park Service\)](#)
- [National Park Service, "Happily Suppressed" \(Valley Forge supply crisis; includes Stirling quotation\) \(National Park Service\)](#)
- [National Park Service, "January 1778 – From the Journals of Valley Forge" \(National Park Service\)](#)

Images:



Gen. Lord Stirling's Headquarters, Valley Forge, 1777-78, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA

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“William Alexander, Lord Stirling,” American Battlefield Trust.

<https://www.battlefields.org/learn/biographies/william-alexander-lord-stirling>