

# Winters of Discontent

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

CONTINENTAL ARMY SOLDIERS SPENT A FAIR PORTION OF THEIR TIME IN WINTER ENCAMPMENTS AWAITING BETTER CONDITIONS TO RENEW THE WAR. THOSE STRETCHES BETWEEN BATTLES SOMETIMES PROVED AS DEADLY AS COMBAT.



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Edward P. Moran's c. 1911 oil painting, *Washington at Valley Forge*, portrays the bitter winter scene that came to embody the suffering of the Continental Army during winter encampments. Weather during the Morristown encampment two years later more accurately embodied those severe conditions.



At Valley Forge, military engineers directed the construction of some 2,000 huts laid out in parallel lines along with miles of trenches, five earthen forts (redoubts), and a bridge over the Schuylkill River.

**T**HROUGHOUT the American War of Independence, General George Washington's army battled two equally formidable foes.

One was Great Britain's army—arguably the most powerful, well-trained, and well-funded fighting force in the world. From 1775 to 1783, Washington and his generals managed to mold two hundred thousand colonial farmers, clerks, and local militiamen into a disciplined and strategically effective Continental Army that eventually drove King George's forces from American soil.

The other foe was winter. At least twice, winter nearly defeated Washington's beleaguered troops, bringing the Continental Army closer to annihilation than the enemy ever did. Snow, cold, and mud severed supply lines, provoked terrible starvation

and disease that killed thousands, and plunged morale so low that thousands more simply deserted.

Washington's military maneuvers reveal his deep concern over the toll the winters took on his men, yet he sometimes managed to use winter to his advantage.

Warfare in the 18th Century—at least where the climate presented four seasons—came to a halt when weather turned cold and rainy. For one reason, aristocratic European army commanders disdained the discomforts of cold, snow, and mud and chose not to fight. More practically, frequent rain and snow interfered with the firing of flintlock muskets and pistols.

Winter weather also hampered the ongoing challenge of trying to get necessary provisions to the troops. Rather than commandeering supplies from the local population, Washington sought to purchase them. But civilian supply lines could be unreliable as well

as insufficient to meet the needs of both residents and the army.

During much of the war, when the snow started to fly, Britain's troops headed into American cities where they set up quarters in civilian homes, local buildings, and makeshift camps. Meanwhile, Washington and his generals—veterans of the far-less-formal French and Indian War—continued to skirmish with the enemy in rain and snow, flouting military protocol of the day.

The British command regarded the Continental Army's behavior in winter as militarily uncouth, especially during late December 1776 and early January 1777, when Washington's army scored two spectacular off-season surprise attacks in New Jersey—first in Trenton and a week later in Princeton—before withdrawing for winter encampment. Those two crucial victories gave colonial soldiers renewed hope that they could actually win the war.



COURTESY OF MORRISTOWN NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

Describing the reproduction huts perched along a hilltop in Morristown National Historical Park, chief curator Jude Pfister noted, “The huts today are in an approximate location of the originals, but we will probably never know exactly where they were. The area has been so completely disturbed over the years that all traces of the originals have all but vanished.”

The downside to Washington’s strategy of pushing military maneuvers well into winter were unexpected winter storms that sometimes stopped the Continental Army in its tracks before troops could construct shelters. This meant only a thin sheet of tent canvas separated raggedly clothed soldiers from the cold and wet. At times shoeless American soldiers left mile upon mile of bloody footprints in the snow.

### VARIED WEATHER AND MORALE

While Continental Army winter encampments throughout the Revolution shared a common purpose, organization, and structure, each was distinctive due to the lay of the land, the intensity of the year’s winter, the availability of food and clothing, and troop morale at the end of the fighting season.

For their part, Washington and his

top aides spent every winter encampment headquartered in nearby citizens’ houses—usually the finest mansions in the vicinity—a practice the era considered a privilege of leadership.

Winter weather during the years of the Revolution varied greatly. Troops in early 1779, for example, experienced only a handful of light snowstorms and consistently above-freezing temperatures at their New Jersey encampment, with cherry trees blooming the first week of April. A year later, near the same location, Washington’s army suffered through what is still considered one of the most severe winters on record for the eastern United States.

Washington’s winter encampments lasted up to five months. Muddy roads needed to dry out enough so soldiers, wagons, and cannon could traverse them. Also, soldiers needed weeks of warmer weather to drill and prepare for the marches, skirmishes, and battles that lay ahead of them.

Although the Continental Army fought the British in New England, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and into the South (where winter didn’t impede), Washington favored the area near Morristown for his army’s winter encampments in 1777,

High-ranking officers and generals often spent winters in comfort while their troops suffered in makeshift huts. The 1750 home of Henry Wick, owner of a portion of land near Morristown, New Jersey, housed General Arthur St. Clair in the winter of 1780 when the troops encamped nearby.



DAN BEARDS/COURTESY OF MORRISTOWN NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

1779, 1780, and for part of his army in 1781. With the Watchung Mountains and Great Swamp as natural topographical barriers, the Morristown site could be easily defended against a surprise attack. Yet its proximity to the vital transportation corridor connecting New York City and Philadelphia allowed for valuable reconnaissance of British troop movement.

In other years, Washington split his army into separate encampments, sending portions to strategic locales such as Redding, Connecticut, and New Windsor, New York. The latter, in 1782, was the army's final winter encampment.

### WORST OF THE CAMPS

Mention of Continental Army winter encampments usually brings to mind the winters spent at Valley Forge and two years later at Morristown. During both, starving American soldiers endured severe weather in tattered clothing, often shoeless, and with few blankets for warmth. While the snow and cold exacerbated the terrible conditions, the larger problem was that the army's supply lines had stopped functioning, mostly because of money problems and flawed logistics.

At Valley Forge in 1778, the winter climate was moderate, despite a carefully cultivated public impression of a much harsher season—the men seldom could scrape up enough snow to melt for drinking water. Many of the two thousand huts were built haphazardly, and sanitation was a persistent problem. The worst episodes occurred after spring arrived, with warmer weather contributing to outbreaks of influenza, typhus, typhoid, and dysentery. Three thousand soldiers died at Valley Forge, most of them from disease.

The winter two years later, in 1780, however, still stands as one of the worst, with a record twenty-eight snowstorms hitting New Jersey. Washington's troops at Morristown stood hip-deep in snow while clearing six hundred acres to build a thousand wooden huts, a task that took two months.

"The weather for several days has been remarkably cold and stormy," wrote James Thacher (1754-1844), an army surgeon from Massachusetts. "On

the third instant, we experienced one of the most tremendous snowstorms ever remembered. No man could endure its violence many minutes without danger of his life. Some of the soldiers were actually covered while lying in their tents, buried like sheep under the snow, and almost smothered."

The troops at Morristown figured their situation would improve once they had adequate shelter and the weather turned warmer so that supplies could begin flowing into the encampment. But by May, with still no new supplies of food or clothing, hope turned to anger. Thousands deserted

and two regiments mutinied.

"The men were now exasperated beyond endurance. They could not stand it any longer," wrote a Massachusetts private, Joseph Plumb Martin (1760-1850). "They saw no alternative but to starve to death, or break up the army, give all up and go home. This was a hard matter for the soldiers to think upon. They were truly patriotic, they loved their country, and they had already suffered everything short of death in its cause. And now, after such extreme hardships to give up all was too much, but to starve to death was too much also. What was to be done?"

**Rudimentary bunks were stacked 3 high along each wall of the huts at Valley Forge, with each hut intended to house 12 men in about 200 square feet.**



COURTESY OF ADAM SMITH



COURTESY OF MORRISTOWN NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

Washington's army confiscated hundreds of acres of timber from landowners to build the huts for winter encampments, a challenge in deep snow. Because the army had no money, soldiers turned the huts over to the landowners as compensation when they departed.

## A SENSE OF ORDER

During the encampment at Valley Forge, Prussian-born Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben (1730-94), a Continental Army general who became Washington's chief of staff, wrote the army's first manual of regulations governing drills, tactics, and disciplines. In it, von Steuben laid out the structure of the army's encampments for the rest of the war.

The general based his plan on a European model calling for tents—or huts in winter—to be arranged in rows according to soldiers' ranks. If an intention of the Revolution was to eliminate one social class being subordinate to another, von Steuben's layout is indeed ironic. His plan promoted incredible disparity in habitat comfort between enlisted men and their officers.

The average enlisted man spent his winters in a hut with several other soldiers with about 18 square feet to call his own, while the average officer had nearly 80 square feet of personal space in his significantly larger and less-populated hut.

"Given that the war has the aura of 'liberty and equality' attached to it, even at the time, many found the conditions the enlisted men faced surprising, especially when compared to Washington and the officers," said Jude Pfister, chief of cultural resources at Morristown National Historical Park and author of the recent *America Writes Its History: The Formation of a National Narrative*.

"Von Steuben and European influence aside, I think it's more likely that the 'liberty and equality' language had very definite limits during that period," he continued. "Certain people were leaders, and hence due a finer lifestyle and appropriate deference. And certain were followers, and hence due a lesser lifestyle of respecting your social superiors. This approach applied to both civil and military life."

According to von Steuben's encampment plan, each regiment was allotted twenty-four huts, situated up to four rows deep. Streets up to 20 feet wide separated the rows, with walkways intersecting the streets

to create blocks of four huts each. (Archaeological digs at the major encampment sites, however, confirm more irregularity in the placement of huts than von Steuben advocated.)

"The huts are arranged in straight lines forming a regular, uniform, compact village," Thacher wrote in his *Military Journal During the American Revolution*. "The whole is similar in form to a tent encampment. The ground for a considerable distance in front of the soldiers' line of huts is cleared of wood, stumps and rubbish, and is every morning swept clean for the purpose of a parade ground and roll call for the respective regiments."

## PRIVILEGE OF RANK

Huts for enlisted men generally were 16 feet long and 14 feet wide. Full logs formed the bottom, or sill, of the walls. Rough-hewn logs with notched ends were stacked up 6 or 7 feet above ground level, with clay and mud as chinking between the logs. Roofs likely were thin hardwood boards, overlapped and weighted down with branches.

## A TALE OF TWO ENCAMPMENTS

“In this manner have our soldiers, without nails, and almost without tools, except the axe and saw, provided for their officers and for themselves comfortable and convenient quarters,” Thacher wrote.

Enlisted men’s huts had a chimney at one end to accommodate a 5-foot-wide fireplace in the single-room dwelling. The floor was dirt, and often one door and one window were cut into the walls. Bunk beds lined the walls—four stacks of bunks, each three bunks high. According to the regulations, these huts encompassed 200 square feet in which twelve men were to sleep, prepare meals, eat, and socialize.

In contrast, the standard officer’s hut was 22 feet by 14 feet, or more than 300 square feet. Reports differ as to how many officers occupied a single hut. While Thacher wrote that the Morristown officers’ huts housed three or four men, accounts from the 1778 encampment at Redding, Connecticut, have these larger huts housing a single officer and his “waiter.”

An officer’s hut usually was partitioned into two rooms of equal size. The waiter’s side had a dirt floor, a 5-foot-wide fireplace, and a bunk. The officer’s room often had a bunk, table, wood-plank floor, and a second fireplace for his personal comfort. The waiter was charged with preparing the officer’s meals, keeping his clothing in order, and keeping his quarters swept and clean.

Class differences are apparent even in the ceramic sherds archaeologists have recovered at encampment sites. Pottery in the enlisted men’s huts usually was redware, either unglazed or having a black glaze with a light stripe. Sherds found in officers’ huts are white porcelain with hand-painted blue designs, likely pieces of sugar bowls, small pitchers, and tea sets.

The location of latrines at most of the encampment sites remains unknown. As snow piled up, the weather turned bitter cold, and the soldiers grew weaker from hunger, diarists made references to “vaults,” or pits close to the huts that served as latrines—when the men were fortunate enough to be able to leave the hut when nature called.

For several decades after the Revolution, Americans wanted the memory of the two worst encampments—at Valley Forge in 1778 and Morristown in 1780—to simply fade away.

After all, Valley Forge represented a devastating breakdown in supply lines that resulted directly in starvation and waves of disease that killed three thousand troops. Morristown saw a similar supply failure that killed more than three hundred soldiers through starvation and disease, prompted another thousand to desert, and incited two regiments to mutiny.

“Nobody celebrated either Valley Forge or Morristown during the Revolution itself,” according to Ray Raphael, a leading writer on the Revolutionary era and author of *Founding Myths: Stories That Hide Our Patriotic Past*. “The sorry plight of the poor men and teenage boys who comprised the Continental Army was a guarded secret, kept from the British, who must not know their vulnerability, and from the French, who might deny aid to a weak ally. Further, the failure of our civilian governments to supply troops was just that—a failure, not to be publicized.”

Years after the war, aging veterans penned memoirs and published wartime journals. Prominent among them were army surgeon James Thacher and infantryman Joseph Plumb Martin, both of Massachusetts, who described the hardships of Valley Forge and Morristown in riveting detail.

“During the 1820s and 1830s, as the few remaining veterans realized they were the ‘end of the line’ survivors, we begin to see a virtual swarm of memoirs and re-packaging of the events surrounding the Revolution, with the encampments receiving special attention,” noted Jude Pfister of Morristown National Historical Park.

“In many instances, Americans seemed conflicted during the years leading to the Civil War over the purpose and meaning of the Revolution, and rather than dwell on the salient issues, dove feet-first into what is traditionally easy to do concerning war—focus on bravery, sacrifice, and heroism.”

As the story of the War of Independence was developed, Valley Forge became popular fodder for textbooks, histories, and a source of national pride, while Morristown was glossed over.

“If Valley Forge was the low point of the war, the story went, it was also the turning point. After that, things got better,” Raphael said. “For the Valley Forge story to work, a climatically normal winter was transformed into one of the most severe—something akin to the one soldiers actually experienced at Morristown two years later.”

Especially damning is that the most severe problems at Morristown occurred after the terrible winter had passed. Spring should have seen supplies flowing into the camp, but by May the situation hadn’t improved.

The 1800s revisionist history of the Revolution, which still survives in many books, successively painted one picture of Valley Forge and quite another of Morristown, according to Raphael.

“Writers who looked to the Revolutionary War to inspire a new wave of patriotism developed a story line that transformed the troubled winter at Valley Forge into a source of pride. Soldiers had endured their sufferings without complaint, drilled obediently under the instructions of Baron Von Steuben, and emerged strong and ready to fight,” he wrote.

“Historical memory of Morristown was conveniently suppressed, in part because it revealed that the soldiers’ hardships continued throughout the war, virtually unabated. Even worse, Morristown afforded clear proof that the soldiers’ suffering was not always so silent.”



Re-enactors camp in tents during a winter event at Valley Forge National Historical Park. When the Continental Army stayed here in the winter of 1777, not enough snow fell for the men to melt for an adequate supply of drinking water.

PHOTOGRAPH NAME/COURTESY OF VALLEY FORGE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

## BAD FOOD AND MONOTONY

In his *Memoir of a Revolutionary Soldier: The Narrative of Joseph Plumb Martin*, the young soldier referred to winter as “our old Continental line of starving and freezing.” At the Redding encampment in 1779, he recalled, “We now and then got a little bad bread and salt beef. I believe it chiefly horsebeef, for it was generally thought to be such at the time. The month of January was very stormy, a good deal of snow fell, and in such weather it was a mere chance if we got anything at all to eat.”

Martin’s comments stand in contrast to the official daily diet for Redding’s soldiers that called for 1½ pounds of beef or a pound of pork or a pound of fish; 1¼ pounds of flour; a

half gill (¼ pint) of rice, and a gill of rum. Other accounts confirm that this daily allotment was seldom fulfilled in any encampment once the harshest weeks of winter arrived.

To offset their hunger and cold and keep enlisted men occupied and out of trouble, officers assigned the men regular camp chores and rotated them among the men, according to Daniel Cruson in *Putnam’s Revolutionary War Winter Encampment*, his 2011 history of the 1779 Redding encampment.

“When they had too much leisure time, they tended to complain about their problems, both real and imagined, which led to discontent, loss of morale and in extreme cases, threats of mutiny and mutiny itself,”

Cruson wrote.

In *The Uncertain Revolution: Washington and the Continental Army at Morristown* (2007), historian John Cunningham reviewed the orders issued to summarize a day’s activities: “Awakened at dawn to the boom of the morning gun. Stand in knee-high snow for roll call. Hear the day’s assignments. Eat a meager breakfast, cooked by a hut mate. Police the campground, clean out the latrines or dig new ones. Serve officers, eat dinner (the big meal), midday time to relax. Supper not much. Beating of tattoo, 8 p.m. bedtime.”

Routine chores performed regardless of weather included sweeping the huts and even the roads and

## ONLY TRACES REMAIN

Long gone are the wooden huts that housed the Continental Army’s eight thousand or more soldiers for months on end during the Revolution’s winter encampments.

Today, a person visiting the sites of the encampments—Morristown, New Jersey, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, New Windsor, New York, and Redding, Connecticut—can see a smattering of reproduction huts and other facilities related to the huge camps. But, in many cases, their placement and even appearance are based on informed guesswork.

The reason is because the original huts were given back to the landowners when the army returned to action. Wherever the army had encamped for the winter, several thousand trees were felled and hewn into logs for the huts. The ground was reworked into parade grounds intersected with roads and pathways. Latrines, the offal of butchered animals, and debris littered the campgrounds.

Because the army had no money to pay landowners for use of the land or loss of income from farming or timber, the huts themselves served as compensation.

“The huts constituted a rich source for board lumber, nails, window glass and a copious supply of logs, which would have become many cords of firewood,” wrote historian Daniel Cruson in *Putnam’s Revolutionary War Winter Encampment*. “These resources were probably harvested from the huts over a period of several years.”

By the time the historical park movement revved up, with Morristown National Historical Park becoming the nation’s first, founded in 1933, no huts or auxiliary facilities remained.

Describing the Morristown site, chief curator Jude Pfister said, “The area has been so completely disturbed over the years that all traces of the originals have all but vanished.”

In many cases, only little piles of chimney stones revealed the locations of individual huts, while tiny fragments of bone helped pinpoint their interiors.

“A characteristic of the [Redding] park huts that have been excavated is the scatter of bone, usually measuring less than half an inch square, littering the dirt floor,” Cruson noted. “These fragments were the remains of meals that were eaten in the hut. The bone was then walked on and broken into smaller pieces and tracked all over the living area.”

Places lacking such fragments usually indicate either the base of an exterior wall or the presence of a wood floor.

Assumptions developed years ago still challenge today’s historians and archaeologists. For example, both the Morristown and Redding sites must have had hospitals and cemeteries, right?

“In the early days of the park, a hospital hut was built, because, naturally, one should no doubt have been there,” said Pfister of the Morristown site. “That hut lingered until the 1960s, and to this day we get people asking about it who remember it from the 1950s with their school outing. In fact, there was no hospital or cemetery there.”

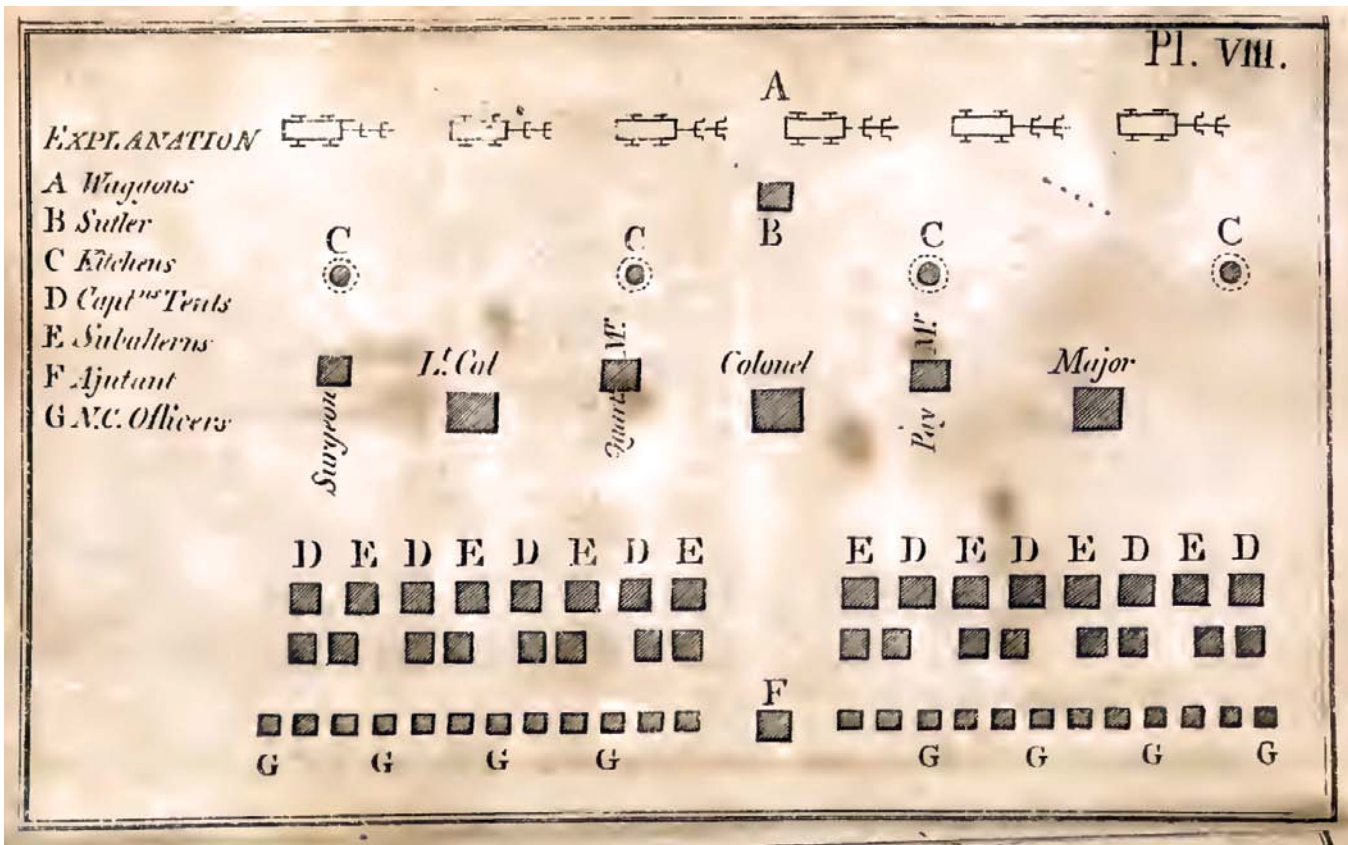
Cruson cited a similar situation at Redding. In 1889 someone found some mounds and a headstone and concluded it was the encampment’s cemetery for soldiers who died during the winter. A monument was erected in 1898, and a series of granite posts and swag chains were placed at the cemetery site in the 1920s.

But most, if not all, of the twenty-seven soldiers who died that winter had been in a military hospital in nearby Danbury. “They were undoubtedly buried in the field in back of the hospital building,” Cruson wrote. “It is unlikely that the dead would have been buried on the encampment grounds, where the growing number of grave markers would have had a deleterious effect on the morale of the soldiers. This would also have been the case at other winter encampments, such as as those at Valley Forge and Morristown, where no burials associated with the Revolution have been discovered.”



Collapsed piles of stones in orderly rows are the only visible sign of the 3,000 troops under General Israel Putnam who camped around Redding, Connecticut, during the winter of 1778-79.

COURTESY OF BRENT COLLEY, WWW.HISTORYOFREDDING.COM



General von Steuben proposed an orderly layout for Continental Army encampments with tents/huts arranged by rank. This plate appears in the 1784 reprint of von Steuben's *Regulations for Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*.

paths around the huts and digging and cleaning the latrines as well as guard duty, drill practice, and patrolling the countryside. Enlisted men performed nearly all of the work around the camp, with some of them designated as servants to cook for officers and clean their huts.

Drinking was often described as helping to break the mind-numbing monotony of the hut-bound troops, but the daily allotment of a quarter-cup of rum—when it was available at all—did not enable much inebriation. Few court martials for drunkenness or disorderly conduct are recorded during the encampments, and no records noted drunkenness posing a problem.

Likewise, card games, because they provoked gambling, were seriously frowned upon. “Card playing and gaming of every species is prohibited in the most positive and preemptory terms,” General Israel Putnam (1718-90), a war hero from Connecticut, ordered his troops at the Redding encampment. “All who are

possessed of playing cards are to bring them forth and together and to make a burnt offering of them this evening.”

### RETURNING TO BATTLE

Unimaginable to the soldiers during the freezing blizzards, warm weather did eventually return. Lush breezes, ripe with spring blossoms, prompted the soldiers to clean their huts of months' worth of debris and filth and haul it to impromptu pits for disposal. They buried decomposing carcasses of animals that had perished during the winter, and the air took on a renewed freshness.

Warmer weather also meant the return of warfare. For several weeks, Continental soldiers rose at five in the morning to exercise and drill for two hours. The same happened at four in the afternoon so the troops would be in reasonable shape to maneuver when they again confronted the Redcoats. Depending on weather and enemy activity, the Continental Army departed its encampments anytime

from April to July.

Although several memoirs of the time recorded much suffering related to the Continental Army's winter encampments, army surgeon Thacher struck a different tone in his journal entry for January 3, 1781, while encamped along the Hudson River.

“Our brigade took possession of our huts for the winter, in the woods about two miles in the rear of the works at West Point. Our situation is singularly romantic, on a highly elevated spot, surrounded by mountains and craggy rocks of a prodigious size, lofty broken cliffs, and the banks of the beautifully meandering Hudson affording a view of the country for many miles in all directions. We have now no longer reason to complain of our accommodations. The huts are warm and comfortable, wood in abundance at our doors, and a tolerable supply of provisions. Our only complaint is want of money.” \*

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