

Journal of a Soldier at Valley Forge



Date ★ December 1777

Place ★ Valley Forge, Pennsylvania

Type of Source ★ Eyewitness (journal)

Author ★ Albigenice Waldo

Context ★ August through October of 1777 saw George Washington and the Continental Army repeatedly beaten by the British. In September the British captured the Americans' capital of Philadelphia. The army was forced to camp at Valley Forge 20 miles northwest of Philadelphia for the winter. The winter at Valley Forge wreaked havoc on the poorly supplied soldiers. Albigenice Waldo was an army surgeon from Connecticut. He kept an often sarcastic journal of the appalling conditions of the camp. Some 2,500 troops died at Valley Forge, most due to disease. Spelling and grammar are from the original.

DECEMBER 6

The Enemy forming a Line from towards our right to the **extremity** of our left upon an opposite long **height** to ours in a Wood. Our men were under Arms all Day and this Night also, as our Wise General was determined not to be attack'd Napping....

extremity
far end

height
high ground

Provisions
supplies, especially food

Tophet
Hell

Militia
temporary local soldiers

prodigious
extremely

Providence
God

nausiating
sickening

dragoons
horse-riding soldiers

Forage
food taken from locals

DECEMBER 8

All at our Several Posts. **Provisions** and Whiskey very scarce. Were Soldiers to have plenty of Food and Rum, I believe they would Storm **Tophet**...

DECEMBER 11

At four o'clock the Whole Army were Order'd to March to Swedes Ford on the River Schuylkill, about 9 miles N.W. of Chestnut Hill, and 6 from White Marsh our present Encampment. At sun an hour high the whole were mov'd from the Lines and on their march with baggage. This Night encamped in a Semi circle nigh the Ford. The enemy had march'd up the West side of Schuylkill—Potter's Brigade if [sic] Pennsylvania **Militia** were already there, and had several skirmishes with them with some loss on this side and considerable on the Enemies....

I am **prodigious** Sick and cannot get anything comfortable—what in the name of **Providence** am I to do with a fit of Sickness in this place where nothing appears pleasing to the Sicken'd Eye and **nausiating** Stomach. But I doubt not Providence will find out a way for my relief. But I cannot eat Beef if I starve, for my stomach positively refuses to entertain such Company, and how can I help that?

DECEMBER 12

A Bridge of Waggons made accross the Schuylkill last Night consisting of 36 waggons, with a bridge of Rails between them each. Some skirmishing over the River. Militia and **dragoons** brought into Camp several Prisoners. Sun Set—We were order'd to march over the River—It snows—I'm Sick—eat nothing—No Whiskey—No **Forage**—Lord—Lord—Lord. The Army were 'till Sun Rise crossing the River—some at the Waggon Bridge and some at the Raft Bridge below. Cold and uncomfortable.

DECEMBER 13

The Army march'd three miles from the West side of the River and encamp'd near a place call'd the Gulph [the encampment is Valley Forge] and not an improper name neither, for this Gulph seems well adapted by its situation to keep us from the pleasures and enjoyments of this World, or being **conversant** with anybody in it. It is an excellent place to raise the Ideas of a Philosopher beyond the **glutted** thoughts and Reflexions of an **Epicurian**. His Reflexions will be as different from the Common Reflexions of Mankind as if he were unconnected with the world, and only conversant with **immaterial** beings. It cannot be that our Superiors are about to hold consultations with Spirits infinitely beneath their **Order**, by bringing us into these utmost regions of the **Terraqueous Sphere**. No it is, upon consideration for many good purposes since we are to Winter here—

There is plenty of Wood and Water.

There are but few families for the **soldiery** to Steal from—tho' far be it from a Soldier to Steal.

There are warm sides of Hill to erect huts on.

They will be heavenly Minded like Jonah when in the Belly of a Great Fish.

They will not become home Sick as is sometimes the Case when Men live in the Open World—since the reflections which will naturally arise from their present **habitation**, will lead them into the more noble thoughts of employing their leisure hours in filling their knapsacks with such materials as may be necessary on the Journey to another Home.

DECEMBER 14

Prisoners and Deserters are continually coming in. The Army which has been surprisingly healthy **hitherto**, now begins to grow sickly from the continued **fatigues** they have suffered this Campaign. Yet they still show a spirit of **Alacrity** and Contentment not to be expected from so young Troops. I am Sick—**discontented**—and **out of humour**. Poor food—hard lodging—Cold Weather—fatigue—Nasty Cloaths—nasty Cookery—Vomit half my time—smoak'd out my senses—the Devil's in't—I can't Endure it—Why are we sent here to starve and Freeze—What sweet **Felicities** have I left at home; A charming Wife—pretty Children—Good Beds—good food—good Cookery—all **aggreable**—all harmonious. Here all Confusion—smoke and Cold—hunger and filthiness—A pox on my bad luck. There comes a bowl of beef soup—full of burnt leaves and dirt, sickish enough to make a **Hector spue**—away with it Boys—I'll live like the **Chameleon upon Air**. Poh! Poh! crys Patience within me—you talk like a fool. Your being sick Covers you mind with a **Melancholic** Gloom, which makes every thing about you appear gloomy. See the poor Soldier, when in health—with what cheerfulness he meets his foes and encounters every hardship—if barefoot, he labours thro' the Mud and Cold with a Song in his mouth extolling War and Washington—if his food be bad, he eats it **notwithstanding** with **seeming content**—blesses God for a good Stomach and Whistles it into digestion. But **harkee** Patience, a moment—There comes a Soldier, his bare feet are seen thro' his worn out Shoes, his legs nearly naked from the tatter'd remains of an only pair of stockings, his Breeches not sufficient to cover

conversant
familiar

glutted
full

Epicurian
philosopher who believed in enjoying simple pleasures and avoiding pain

immaterial
spiritual

Order
rank

Terraqueous Sphere
The Earth

soldiery
army

habitation
home

hitherto
previously

fatigues
exhaustion

Alacrity
eagerness

discontented
unhappy

out of humour
disoriented

Felicities
happinesses

aggreable
agreeable

Hector
mythical hero known for his toughness

spue
vomit

Chameleon upon Air
refers to a superstition that chameleons ate only air

Melancholic
depressing

notwithstanding
anyway

seeming content
apparent happiness

harkee
listen

his nakedness, his Shirt hanging in Strings, his hair dishevell'd, his face **meagre**; his whole appearance pictures a person **forsaken** and discouraged. He comes, and crys with an air of wretchedness and despair, I am Sick, my feet lame, my legs are sore, my body cover'd with this tormenting Itch—my Cloaths are worn out, my **Constitution** is broken, my former Activity is exhausted by fatigue, hunger and Cold, I fail fast I shall soon be no more! and all the reward I shall get will be—"Poor Will is dead." People who live at home in Luxury and Ease, quietly possessing their habitations, Enjoying their Wives and families in peace, have but a very faint Idea of the unpleasing sensations, and continual Anxiety the Man endures who is in Camp, and is the husband and parent of an agreeable family. These same People are willing we should suffer every thing for their Benefit and advantage, and yet are the first to Condemn us for not doing more!!

DECEMBER 15

Quiet. Eat **Pessimens**, found myself better for their **Lenient Opperation**. Went to a house, poor and small, but good food within—eat too much from being so long **Abstemious**, thro' **want** of **palatables**. Mankind are never truly thankfull for the Benefits of life, until they have experienc'd the want of them. The Man who has seen misery knows best how to enjoy good. He who is always at ease and has enough of the Blessings of common life is an **Impotent** Judge of the feelings of the unfortunate....

DECEMBER 16

Cold Rainy Day, Baggage ordered over the Gulph of our Division, which were to march at Ten, but the baggage was order'd back and for the first time since we have been here the Tents were pitch'd, to keep the men more comfortable. Good morning Brother Soldier (says one to another) how are you? All wet I thank'e, hope you are so (says the other). The Enemy have been at Chestnut Hill Opposite to us near our last encampment the other side Schuylkill, made some **Ravages**, kill'd two of our Horsemen, taken some prisoners. We have done the like by them....

DECEMBER 18

Universal Thanksgiving—a Roasted pig at Night. God be thanked for my health which I have pretty well recovered. How much better should I feel, were I assured my family were in health. But the same good Being who graciously preserves me, is able to preserve them and bring me to the ardently wish'd for enjoyment of them again

DECEMBER 21

Preparations are made for huts. Provisions Scarce. Mr. Ellis went homeward—sent a Letter to my Wife. Heartily wish myself at home, my Skin and eyes are almost spoil'd with continual smoke. A general cry thro' the Camp this Evening among the Soldiers, "No Meat! No Meat!"—the Distant **vales** Echo'd back the **melancholy** sound—"No Meat! No Meat!" Immitating the noise of Crows and Owls, also, made a part of confused Musick.

What have you for your dinner boys? "Nothing but **Fire Cake** and Water, Sir." At night, "Gentlemen the Supper is ready." What is your Supper Lads? "Fire Cake and Water, Sir." Very poor beef has been drawn in our Camp the greater part of this season. A Butcher bringing a Quarter of this kind of Beef into Camp

meagre
thin

foresaken
abandoned

Constitution
health

Pessimens
persimmons, a sour plum-like fruit

Lenient Opperation
gentle help

Abstemious
with little food

want
lack

palatables
edible food

Impotent
powerless

Ravages
raids

vales
small valleys

melancholy
sad

Fire Cake
bread made with flour or corn meal, water, and a little fat then cooked on the fire

one day who had white Buttons on the knees of his **breeches**, a Soldier cries out—“There, there Tom is some more of your fat Beef, by my soul I can see the Butcher’s breeches buttons through it.”

DECEMBER 22

Lay excessive Cold and uncomfortable last Night—my eyes started out from their **Orbits** like a Rabbit’s eyes, occasion’d by a great Cold and Smoke.

Our Division are under Marching Orders this morning. I am ashamed to say it, but I am tempted to steal **Fowls** if I could find them, or even a whole Hog, for I feel as if I could eat one. But the Impoverish’d Country about us, affords but little matter to employ a Thief, or keep a Clever Fellow in good humour. But why do I talk of hunger and hard usage, when so many in the World have not even Fire Cake and Water to eat.... It is not in the power of Philosophy...to convince a man he may be happy and Contented if he will, with a Hungry Belly. Give me Food, Cloaths, Wife and Children, kind Heaven! and I’ll be as contented as my Nature will permit me to be. This Evening a Party with two **field pieces** were order’d out. At 12 **of the Clock** at Night, Providence sent us a little Mutton, with which we immediately had some Broth made, and a fine Stomach for same. Ye who Eat Pumkin Pie and Roast Turkies, and yet Curse fortune for using you **ill**, Curse her no more, **least** she reduce you[r] Allowance of her favours to a bit of Fire Cake, and a **draught** of Cold Water, and in Cold Weather too.

breeches

pants

Orbits

sockets

Fowls

birds such as chickens, ducks, turkeys, and geese

field pieces

small cannons

of the Clock

today shortened to “o’clock”

ill

badly

least

lest

draught

drink

Source: <http://www.let.rug.nl/nusa/D/1776-1800/war/waldo.htm> (June 19, 2008)