

# America's Worst Winter Ever

And why mythmakers chose to forget it

By **Ray Raphael**

Tiny  
Pix to  
come

In January 1780, fighting in the Revolutionary War came to a standstill as Mother Nature transformed America into a frigid hell. For the only time in recorded history, all of the saltwater inlets, harbors and sounds of the Atlantic coastal plain, from North Carolina northeastward, froze over and remained closed to navigation for a period of a month or more. Sleighs, not boats, carried cords of firewood across New York Harbor from New Jersey to Manhattan. The upper Chesapeake Bay in Maryland and the York and James rivers in Virginia turned to ice. In Philadelphia, the *high* daily temperature topped the freezing mark only once during the month of January, prompting Timothy Matlack, the patriot who had inscribed the official copy of the Declaration of Independence, to complain that “the ink now freezes in my pen within five feet of the fire in my parlour, at 4 o’clock in the afternoon.”

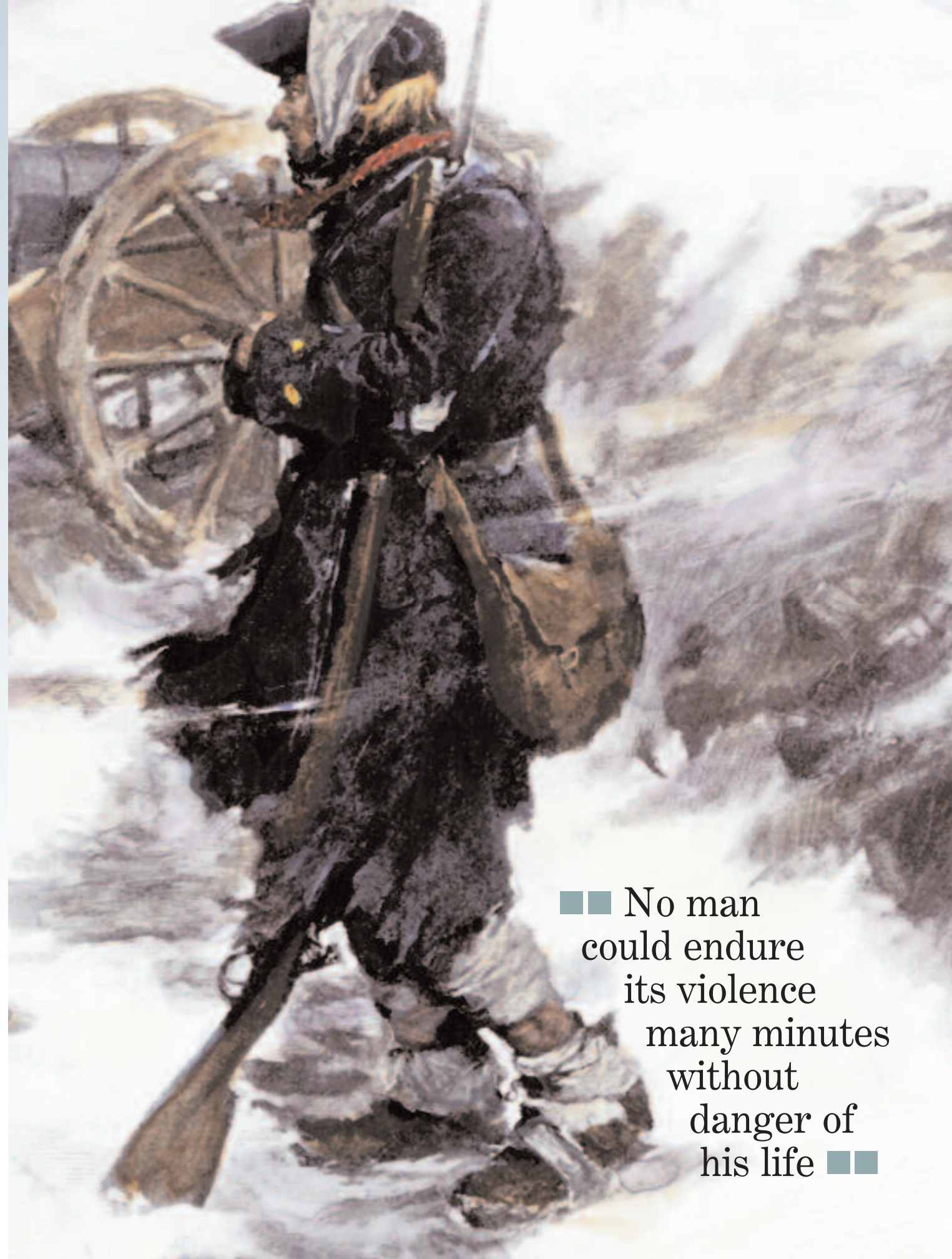
The weather took an especially harsh toll on the 7,460 patriot troops holed up with General George Washington in Morristown, N.J., a strategic site 30 miles west of the British command in New York City. On January 3, the encampment was engulfed by “one of the most tremendous snowstorms ever remembered,” army surgeon James Thacher wrote in his journal. “No man could endure its violence many minutes without danger of his life.” When tents blew off, soldiers were “buried like sheep under the snow...almost smothered in the storm.” The weather made it impossible to get supplies to the men, many of whom had no coats, shirts or shoes and were on the verge of starvation. “For a fortnight past the Troops both Officers and Men, have been almost perishing for want,” George Washington wrote in a letter to civilian officials dated January 8.

The winter at Valley Forge two years earlier is a celebrated part of America’s revolutionary mythology,

while its sequel at Morristown is now largely forgotten. And therein lies a paradoxical tale. The climatic conditions the Continental Army faced at Valley Forge and a year later at Middlebrook, N.J., were mild compared to those they endured at Morristown during the harshest winter in American history (see sidebar, p. TK). “Those who have only been in Valley Forge and Middlebrook during the last two winters, but have not tasted the cruelties of this one, know not what it is to suffer,” wrote Baron Johann de Kalb, a German soldier who served as a major general in the Continental Army.

So why do we remember Valley Forge and not Morristown? The answer, in a nutshell, is that Valley Forge better fits the triumphal story of the Revolution passed

**A 19th-century engraving depicts a sentry at Valley Forge. Winter conditions at Morristown, N.J., two years later were even worse.**



■ ■ No man  
could endure  
its violence  
many minutes  
without  
danger of  
his life ■ ■



## The Continental Army Slept Here

**Patriot soldiers endured the hard winter of 1780 at a Morristown, N.J., camp huddled in groups of 12 in crude 14-by-16-foot log huts. Replica huts have been erected at the site, which is now a national historical park.**

down from generation to generation, while Morristown is viewed as an embarrassment. At Valley Forge, the story goes, soldiers suffered quietly and patiently. They remained true to their leader. At Morristown, on the other hand, they threatened to mutiny.

Nobody celebrated either Valley Forge or Morristown during the Revolution itself. 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 civilian governments to supply troops was just that—a failure, not to be publicized.

By the early 19th century, however, writers who looked to the Revolutionary War to inspire a new wave of patriotism developed a storyline 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. “How strong must have been their love of liberty?” Salma Hale asked rhetorically in a romanticized history written in 1822 for schoolchildren as well as adults. If Valley Forge was the low point of the war, the story went, it was also the turning point. After that, things got better.

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 experienced at Morristown two years later. 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.

At Morristown “we were absolutely, literally starved,” Private Joseph Plumb Martin recalled after the war. “I do solemnly declare that I did not put a single morsel of victuals into my mouth for four days and as many nights, except a little black birch bark which I gnawed off a stick of wood, if that can be called

victuals. I saw several of the men roast their old shoes and eat them, and I was afterwards informed by one of the officers’ waiters, that some of the officers killed and ate a favorite little dog that belonged to one of them.”

The prospect of mass desertions worried General Nathanael Greene. “Here we are surrounded with Snow banks, and it is well we are, for if it was good for traveling, I believe the Soldiers would take up their pack and march,” he reported on January 5. The following day, Greene’s fears were almost realized. “The Army is on upon the eve of disbanding for want of Provisions,” he wrote. Although the army did not break up as Greene feared, men deserted almost daily, about at the same rate as they had been leaving throughout the war, including the winter spent at Valley Forge. The rest toughed it out, and most of those survived.

Ironically, the largest threat to the continued existence of the Continental Army came in the spring, with the passing of harsh weather. Then, soldiers hoped for better fare at their mess, and they did get some food—but not with the regularity they would have preferred. The army’s supply line continued to experience periodic lapses. When nature was to blame, soldiers found the inner strength to endure, but when human error was the cause of their discontent, they were less tolerant. So when little meat turned to no meat in the middle of May, many felt it was time to force the issue.

“The men were now exasperated beyond endurance; they could not stand it any longer,”

Private Martin recalled. “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?”

Finally, on May 25, Martin and his fellow soldiers in the Connecticut line snapped. It was a “pleasant day,” Martin recalled, but as the troops paraded, they started “growling like soreheaded dogs.” That evening they disregarded their officers and acted “contrary to their orders.” When an officer called one of the soldiers “a mutinous rascal,” the rebel defiantly pounded the ground with his musket and called out, “Who will parade with me?” Martin reported the response: “The whole regiment immediately fell in and formed” with the dissenter. Then another regiment joined in, and they both started marching to the beat of the drums—without orders. Officers who stepped in to quell the incipient mutiny found bayonets pointed at their chests. Meanwhile, the defiant troops continued parading and “venting our spleen at our country and government, then at our officers, and then at ourselves for our imbecility in staying there and starving in detail for an ungrateful people who did not care what became of us.”

Two days after the men had so dramatically registered their complaints, a shipment of pork and 30 head of cattle arrived in camp. The immediate crisis was over, but a series of escalating protests occurred in and around Morristown the following winter as well. Throughout the war, American soldiers did not suffer in silence, as the Valley Forge myth suggests. They kept themselves fed and alive however they could, even when that meant speaking out. By remembering Morristown, we acknowledge the can-do, rambunctious spirit that characterized revolutionary soldiers and helped them carry on. ■

*Ray Raphael is the author of Founding Myths and Founders.*

## The Big Chill: Then and Now

Patriot soldiers and civilians endured extremes of weather that Americans in the modern era have never experienced—but may be forced to contend with if severe global warming occurs. The Revolutionary War took place during the Little Ice Age, a period from 1300 to 1850 when winters in North America and Europe were frequently more bitter and stormy than they are today. Summers tended to be cool and droughts frequent. In some areas, the growing season shortened as much as three to four weeks, leading to crop failures. Climate science is notoriously inexact, but some researchers predict that global warming could, paradoxically, lead to another little ice age and drop average temperatures as much as 5 degrees Fahrenheit over much of the United States and 10 degrees in the Northeast and Northern Europe.

Suspected causes of a little ice age include reduced solar activity, volcanic activity and alteration in ocean currents that carry warm water from the tropics to the North Atlantic. It is this last factor that offers reason to worry. According to models of global warming, if the massive Greenland ice sheets were to melt significantly, the influx of freshwater into the North Atlantic could smother or stall the current of warm saltwater that flows from the tropics and warms the coasts of both North America and Europe. A recent study by climatologist William Patterson of the University of Saskatchewan and his colleagues found that such a melt-off could bring on a little ice age in just a few years. “Making central New York as cold as Greenland in five years,” he says, “would be terrible.”

**One detail of the iconic Washington Crossing the Delaware tells a chilling story: Ice choked the river in 1776.**

