

Army wives: The Valley Forge years

By Art Carey

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Twelve years ago, when Nancy Loane visited Washington's headquarters at Valley Forge National Historical Park, she asked the ranger a facetious question: "Did Martha Washington sleep here?"

Loane assumed she knew the answer.

So she was surprised when the ranger informed her that Martha not only had slept in the stone house that her husband occupied during the winter of 1777-78 but also had spent four months there.

The ranger's reply launched Loane on an odyssey of research and discovery and spawned a passion bordering on obsession. Suddenly, she wanted to know all about Martha and George, and she became fiercely curious about another question: Were women besides Martha at Valley Forge?

In a word: Yes.

In fact, most people are as amazed as Loane was to learn that the 14,000 troops who overnight turned Valley Forge into this fledgling nation's second-largest "city" were accompanied by at least 400 women - so many that they constituted a continuing problem for Gen. Washington, who regarded them as a nuisance.

"I began to look at Valley Forge in a new way and to find out things that were extremely exciting," says Loane, an amateur historian with a doctorate in education. "Women did a lot of the work at Valley Forge, and their story has never been told."

Until now. Loane, 66, a Valley Forge resident and park volunteer, has rectified the omission in *Following the Drum: Women at the Valley Forge Encampment*.

"When people think of Valley Forge, they usually think of soldiers huddling around campfires in tattered clothing, leaving bloody footprints as they trudge bootless through the snow," Loane says.

"But don't forget the women. While our soldiers are suffering, so are our women. If the soldiers had no shoes, who else had no shoes? The men at least were supplied with uniforms. The women were supplied with nothing. Records show that only two petticoats were brought into Valley Forge



"Don't forget the women" of the Valley Forge military camp, says Nancy Loane. "While our soldiers are suffering, so are our women." (SHARON GEKOSKI-KIMMEL / Staff Photographer)

during the six-month encampment. If the men were desperate, so, too, were the women and children."

Other books have dealt with camp followers of the Continental Army, but Loane's is the first to focus on the women at Valley Forge, says Holly Mayer, a Duquesne University history professor and the author of *Belonging to the Army: Camp Followers and Community During the American Revolution*.

Mayer calls *Following the Drum* "a good introduction" to the subject. "Nancy did her homework," she says.

Drawing on hundreds of primary documents, such as letters, journals, diaries, military orders, and pension records, Loane discovered that the women at Valley Forge fell into three groups:

The ladies. Martha Washington regularly joined her husband at his encampments in the winter, when the army generally abstained from battle. At Valley Forge, she kept company with such other high-born women as Catharine Greene, Lucy Knox, Rebekah Biddle, Alice Shippen, and Sarah Alexander (also known as Lady Stirling).

These were America's first "military wives," following their officer husbands wherever duty called, in part for companionship and safety.

Greene was married to Nathanael Greene, appointed quartermaster by Washington to tackle the task of supplying the Continental Army. Only 24 when she arrived at Valley Forge, she was flirtatious and described by a contemporary as "one of the most brilliant and entertaining of

women."

Knox, bossy and strong-willed, was married to Henry Knox, one of Washington's most trusted generals, and took their 2-year-old daughter to Valley Forge.

Biddle was a mother in her 20s when she fled the British army in Philadelphia and joined her husband, Clement, the commissary general of forage at Valley Forge. One of her sons, Thomas, then 2, probably accompanied her.

The household help. George Washington's immediate "military family" included cooks, a laundress, and a housekeeper. Hannah Till, his cook, was a slave, as was her husband, Isaac. Washington paid their owner for their services during the war and their freedom afterward. His housekeeper, Elizabeth Thompson, was "a worthy Irish woman" who, at 74, was likely the oldest woman at Valley Forge.



Nancy Loane's discoveries included the Continental Army's transformation of Valley Forge into a temporary city of 14,000, about half the population of Philadelphia.

Common women. Bringing up the rear, after the baggage wagons, these impoverished and bedraggled women were often married to low-ranking soldiers and carrying or tending children. They stitched and washed clothes, cooked meals, and nursed ailing soldiers in exchange for food, shelter, and sometimes cash and clothing.

Although many of these women were as brave, selfless, and long-suffering as the men, some were later tried for luring soldiers to desert. Their number also included prostitutes, a group that prompted one of Washington's aides-de-camp to lament in the spring of 1778 that "the whores . . . have become numerous."

Washington was delighted to have his wife with him at Valley Forge, but he was dismayed that so many women were trailing the troops. Washington once commanded every woman to leave camp and at one point complained: "The multitude of women . . . are a clog upon every movement."

While researching the book, Loane traveled to Williamsburg, Va.; Boston; and all but one of the eight Revolutionary War winter encampment sites. She also spent countless hours in the park's library, deepening her appreciation for both Valley Forge and its history.

"I fell in love with the place," she says. For two years she was a seasonal park ranger, dressing in 18th-century garb and dispensing lore at, among other places, Washington's headquarters.

"One reason I wrote the book," she says, "was so more people could learn something new about Valley Forge."

For example:

The Continental Army transformed the rural hamlet of Valley Forge into a temporary city of 14,000, about half the population of Philadelphia. About 2,000 log huts were built on farmers' fields.

The winter at Valley Forge was rugged, but it was more damp than cold. It was the constant rain and mud, combined with unsanitary conditions, that caused 1,500 to 3,000 soldiers (and an untold number of women) to die of disease.

Not every moment there was miserable, especially for the officers and their wives. There were parties, banquets, music recitals, and theater productions. Joseph Addison's *Cato*, a Washington favorite, was performed before "a very numerous and splendid audience." That winter, Charles Willson Peale painted portraits of about 50 officers and their ladies.

Contrary to myth, Martha Washington was no 18th-century Eleanor Roosevelt. Loane found no evidence that she visited or ministered to the beleaguered troops. However sympathetic she may have been to their plight, her station and upbringing inhibited her from such contact.

Loane is pondering another book, a fictional work contrasting Christmas at Valley Forge then with Christmas now. She serves on the board of the Friends of Valley Forge Park and remains enthralled with the place.

"I've been very lucky," Loane says. "I've found something I absolutely love. It's been tremendous fun doing the research and talking about it. I've tried to look at Valley Forge through a broader prism. We should think of the men, certainly, but we should think of the women, too."