



Following the Drum: Women at the Valley Forge Encampment

Nancy K. Loane

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Friday, December 19, 1777, dawned cold and windy. Fourteen thousand Continental Army soldiers tramped from dawn to dusk along the rutted Pennsylvania roads from Gulph Mills to Valley Forge, the site of their winter encampment. After the soldiers came the army's wagons, then hundreds of camp women. *Following the Drum: Women at the Valley Forge Encampment* tells the story of the forgotten women who spent the winter of 1777–78 with the Continental Army at Valley Forge. While the camp women of Washington's army were poor, dirty creatures who clung to the very edge of survival, many worked as the army's washerwomen, nurses, cooks, or seamstresses. Other women at camp were of higher status: they traveled with Washington's entourage when the army headquarters shifted from place to place and served the general as valued cooks, laundresses, or housekeepers. There were also ladies at camp, part of the "numerous and splendid" audience who enjoyed the camp theater and had their portraits painted by Charles Willson Peale. No evidence suggests that Martha Washington visited informally among the troops at any camp, including Valley Forge. In *Following the Drum*, readers will learn of the 1777–78 encampment's devastating effect on the area's farm families, meet the women and ladies who accompanied and aided the soldiers, and discover a Valley Forge that many never knew existed.

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