

Continental Army winters at Morristown, New Jersey, Dec. 1, 1779

On this day in history, December 1, 1779, the Continental Army establishes winter headquarters at Morristown, New Jersey. George Washington's army had suffered some serious defeats in the month's leading up to what would turn out to be the harshest winter of the 18th century, even worse than the winter at Valley Forge in 1777-1778. In June, the disastrous Penobscot Expedition in Maine had resulted in the loss of 43 American ships and nearly 500 men killed, wounded or captured. Lieutenant Colonel Paul Revere, who was an officer in the Massachusetts militia, lost his appointment over his role in the failed mission. In October, the Americans had failed to retake the city of Savannah. Washington's army had failed to make any serious headway against the British since the victory at Saratoga in 1777.

George Washington made his headquarters at the home of Theodosia Ford, a wealthy widow with four children. Theodosia's husband, Colonel Jacob Ford, Jr. had died shortly after contracting pneumonia at the Battle of Princeton. Jacob and his father owned extensive iron mines and foundries and other businesses. George Washington, with his wife Martha, and several aides and servants stayed at the home. Visitors to the house included the Marquis de Lafayette, Benedict Arnold, French Ambassador the Chevalier de la Lucerne and Generals John Stark, Henry Knox, Israel Putnam and Anthony Wayne. The Ford home is still standing today and is part of the National Park Service's Morristown National Historical Park.

The Continental Army troops stayed in Jockey Hollow nearby the Ford mansion. The encampment sat on a high point, 31 miles west of New York City, where the British army was located. The elevation made it easy to detect any movements of the redcoats. Abundant forests provided logs with which 1,000 log cabins were built for 10,000-13,000 soldiers. As many as twelve soldiers were crowded in each cabin, which had dirt floors.

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Soldiers made their own beds, chairs and tables. Nearly 600 acres of timber were cut down to make the cabins and provide wood for furniture.

The winter turned out to be the worst of the century. George Washington wrote that, "The oldest people now living in this Country do not remember so hard a Winter as the one we are now emerging from. In a word, the severity of the frost exceeded anything of the kind that had ever been experienced in this climate before. " Snow began falling in October, but the bitter cold was the worst part. It was so cold that countless animals froze to death. Indians and soldiers alike avoided the area in the spring because of the smell of rotting flesh everywhere. Disease and food shortages were rampant. Many soldiers deserted.

George Washington's true genius is shown in circumstances like these. Many leaders would not have been able to hold the army together, but Washington encouraged the troops to stay on and fight for freedom. The revealing part... is that they followed him. The war would rage on for another two years.