

George Washington's Desperate Prayer

PENNSYLVANIA Valley Forge

by James L. Loewen

Valley Forge National Historic Park has subtle stories to tell about the nature of warfare in the 18th century, the politics of the American Revolution, and the religion of the founding fathers. Through most of its history however, the Valley Forge landscape has been marshaled in support of uncomplicated morality tales.

The first fabrication Valley Forge inflicts on visitors concerns the extraordinary suffering the men endured as they encamped there. "Valley Forge is the story of an army's epic struggle to survive against terrible odds, against hunger, disease, and the unrelenting forces of nature," says the brochure the National Park Service (NPS) still gives to visitors. This hyperbole originated with George Washington himself, who wrote to the Continental Congress on February 16, 1778, "Naked and starving as they are we cannot enough admire the incomparable patience and fidelity of the soldiery." The brochure for the Valley Forge Historical Society Museum reproduces this sentence on its cover, but it is best viewed as propaganda by Washington to get better funding from Congress, not as an accurate account of the situation at Valley Forge.

At Valley Forge the army was never in such extremities. Careful visitors can discern subtle corrections to this hoary storyline. "The troops were generally ill-equipped to deal with the harsh winter before them," states the NPS introductory film, "Valley Forge, A Winter Encampment." A few seconds later however, the narrator admits, "The Valley Forge winter was generally moderate." The log huts the soldiers built were nice and warm, he tells. Although food was often monotonous, supplies were available, especially if soldiers had money.

Few tourists catch the corrections. Rick Shenkman, who debunked this Valley Forge fable in his *MythAmerica* television series, concluded from interviewing visitors that most leave the movie still believing "all the old stereotypes about suffering patriots." At the Morristown, New Jersey, National Historic Park, the Park Service points out that the winter of 1779-80, which Washington and the troops spent there, was the worst in a hundred years. Nevertheless, Morristown draws far fewer visitors, while "everyone knows" about the terrible winter the troops endured at Valley Forge.

When tourists leave the Valley Forge visitors' center and drive around the park, the largest building they encounter is the beautiful Washington Memorial Chapel, begun in 1903. Its dominant characteristic is its matched sets of dazzling stained glass windows, one depicting the life of Jesus Christ, the other the life of George Washington. "Washington in prayer at Valley Forge is seen in the central opening over the door," explains the chapel's handout. The general kneels in prayer to Almighty God, seeking God's assistance when it seemed only He could aid the American cause, so desperate were its circumstances. The same kneeling general is on display in bronze at the nearby Freedoms Foundation and in a painting in the museum of the Valley Forge Historical Society.

The image and the inspiration for the chapel came from none other than Parson Weems, the Episcopal minister who published the first biography of Washington in 1800. Weems made up both the cherry tree story and the prayer incident, the latter in 1804 for a magazine article. Here is the Valley Forge tale in Weems's vivid prose:

In the winter of 1777, while Washington, with the American army, lay encamped at Valley Forge, a certain good old friend, of the respectable family and name of Potts, if I mistake not, had occasion to pass through the woods near headquarters. Treading his way along the venerable grove, suddenly he heard the sound of a human voice, which, as he advanced, increased on his ear; and at length became like the voice of one speaking much in earnest. As he approached the spot with a cautious step, whom should he behold, in a dark natural bower of ancient oaks, but the commander in chief of the American armies on his knees in prayer! Motionless in surprise, Friend Potts continued on the place till the general, having ended his devotion, arose; and with countenance of angelic serenity, retired to headquarters.

Weems went on to relate how Friend Potts went home and told his wife about the incident.

'Thee knows that I always thought that the sword and the gospel were utterly inconsistent; and that no man could be a soldier and a Christian at the same time. But George Washington has this day convinced me of my mistake.... If George Washington be not a man of God, I am greatly deceived—and still more shall I be deceived, if God do not, through him, work out a great salvation for America.'

Later authors added various details. Sometimes tears flow down Washington's cheeks, or down Potts's as he tells his wife what he saw. Sometimes Potts's wife is "Sarah," sometimes "Betty" or "Martha." Potts himself sometimes becomes a preacher. Regardless of the details, "the Valley Forge story is utterly without foundation in fact," according to historian Paul F. Boiler Jr. A Quaker farmer named Isaac Potts did come into possession of a house in Valley Forge toward the end of the Revolutionary War, Boiler says, "but he was nowhere near Valley Forge in the winter of 1777 when Washington was supposed to have been praying in the snow." Other lapses further discredit the story. Perhaps we shouldn't be too hard on Weems, however, who probably never expected readers to take his fabulous biography, subtitled *Curious Anecdotes, Equally Honourable to Himself, and Exemplary to His Young Country*, so literally.

Nonetheless, aroused by the image, Herbert Burk, rector of All Saints' Episcopal Church in nearby Norristown, preached a sermon around the turn of the century that inspired his listeners to dig into their pockets to commemorate the yarn on the landscape. In 1903 they laid the cornerstone of the Washington Memorial Chapel at Valley Forge, a structure that would eventually cost more than a million dollars. The two parsons, Weems and Burk, doubtless felt that for Americans to believe that George Washington was a pious Christian would do no harm. But Washington wasn't. Like many other leaders of the Revolution he was a Deist. A member of the Episcopal Church, he believed that religion was "an indispensable basis for morality," in Boiler's phrase, but did not believe in conventional Christianity. "He was not given to praying on his knees nor to referring to Jesus in public or in private," Boiler emphasizes. Nor did he take communion. Freemasonry was more important to Washington than Episcopalianism according to Gordon Wood, an authority on the Revolution. Indeed, for many leaders of that time,

Wood notes, Masonry offered something of a surrogate religion complete with ritual, mystery, and fellowship but "without the enthusiasm and sectarian bigotry of organized religion."

In 1928 the United States Post Office furthered the fable by issuing a two-cent stamp of Washington on his knees as the focal point of America's remembrance of Valley Forge on its 150th anniversary. Rupert Hughes, a biographer of Washington, attacked the stamp as endorsing "what all historians know to be a downright lie." Hughes pointed out that General Washington "was in no sense a religious man" and described "the perpetuation of the tradition that he prayed at Valley Forge as the perpetuation of an idle, sanctimonious falsehood." Another citizen told the postal service, "Possibly Washington could not tell a lie, but Weems was not thus handicapped. Under a mass of silly moralizing, he nearly buried the real Washington." But despite the falsehoods that the first stamp brought to light, in 1977 the post office did it again. Honoring the 200th anniversary of Valley Forge, it adapted a 1935 Saturday Evening Post cover of the kneeling Washington for a Christmas stamp that is eerily reminiscent of Protestant Sunday School illustrations of Jesus praying in Gethsemane.

Such inaccurate imagery can have unfortunate consequences. Other important founders were even less Christian than Washington. Thomas Jefferson called himself "an Unitarian," while Ben Franklin said, "I have found Christian dogma unintelligible. Early in life I absented myself from Christian assemblies." The United States was simply not founded as a Christian nation, even though a majority of its citizens have been Christians. People who don't know this, who think the United States is legally Christian, may be less tolerant of agnostics and atheists. Also, since most fundamentalists do not view the United States as a Christian nation today, misrepresenting Washington and other founders as devout Christians prompts some to blame the Supreme Court, the media, "liberals," our entire political leadership, or the devil for causing America's "fall from grace."¹ Notwithstanding the two parsons then, to believe that George Washington was a pious Christian may harm America.

Even if Washington never prayed here, even if that winter wasn't particularly severe, even if not much happened here, Valley Forge is still a beautiful park. Indeed the absence of events there may be its most interesting story. The colonies were at war with the mother country, but no battles were fought from December 1777, through June 1778. Winter does not last until June in Pennsylvania. Nevertheless the colonials stayed in their winter encampment at Valley Forge and the British stayed put in Philadelphia, and life went on without much fighting for six months. War was very different then.²

1. Other fundamentalists, it is important to point out, deny on both historical and theological grounds that the United States was founded as a Christian nation.
2. Lauren Kaminsky, label from "Myths of American History," Frances Tavern Museum, 1995; clipping file of United States Postal Museum for it Washington-in-Prayer stamp, including Henry S. Ritter, 6/18/2.8 letter; Hughes quoted in "Prayer Stamp for Washington Called Baseless," NY Herald Tribune, 2/5/30; Paul F. Boiler Jr., *Not So!* (NY: Oxford UP, 1995), 2.9-31; Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (NY: Knopf, 1992), 198, 2.23; Rick Shenkman, letter, 10/95; Karal Ann Marling, *George Washington Slept Here* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988),

1-7; Fred E. Lange Jr., "Correction," UU World (May 1997): 9.



Here is the Weems tale as illustrated by the United States Post Office Department in 1928.