

**Washington's 8 Winters
during the
American Revolutionary War**



**by
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There seems to be some controversy about how many winters General George Washington and the Continental Army spent at Valley Forge. Was it 1, or 2?

Let's begin by stating a few facts surrounding this question. First, it was the standard practice by all armies during the period to go into a winter encampment each year. This was done for two reasons. It was considered too difficult to mount an effective military campaign at a time when the weather was such a deterrent to good military effectiveness. And, then the logistics of moving armies during the winter and supplying them was much too arduous. So, rarely did military leaders engage in military campaigns during the winter. The winter encampment was utilized to repair and replenish supplies and equipment. And, sometimes, training was conducted during these winter encampments.

Secondly, during the eight years that the war lasted, the British wintered in Boston the first year and in New York the remaining seven years. During the winter of 1777-1778, they also had an army wintered at Philadelphia which they had just captured. They abandoned Philadelphia and returned to New York the following spring. So, the

American army wintered nearby these British winter encampments, to insure they didn't venture forth and cause mischief in the country side.

The war began on April 19, 1775, with the skirmish at Lexington Green in Massachusetts. The fighting was declared ended by Washington exactly eight years later, to the day – on April 19, 1783. The war was officially ended on September 3, 1783, with the signing of the Treaty of Paris. So, there were eight winters during which the Continental Army had to have a winter encampment – somewhere.

With this in mind, let us examine the exact locations of each of Washington's eight winters.

1. Winter of 1775-1776 – Surrounding Boston, MA.

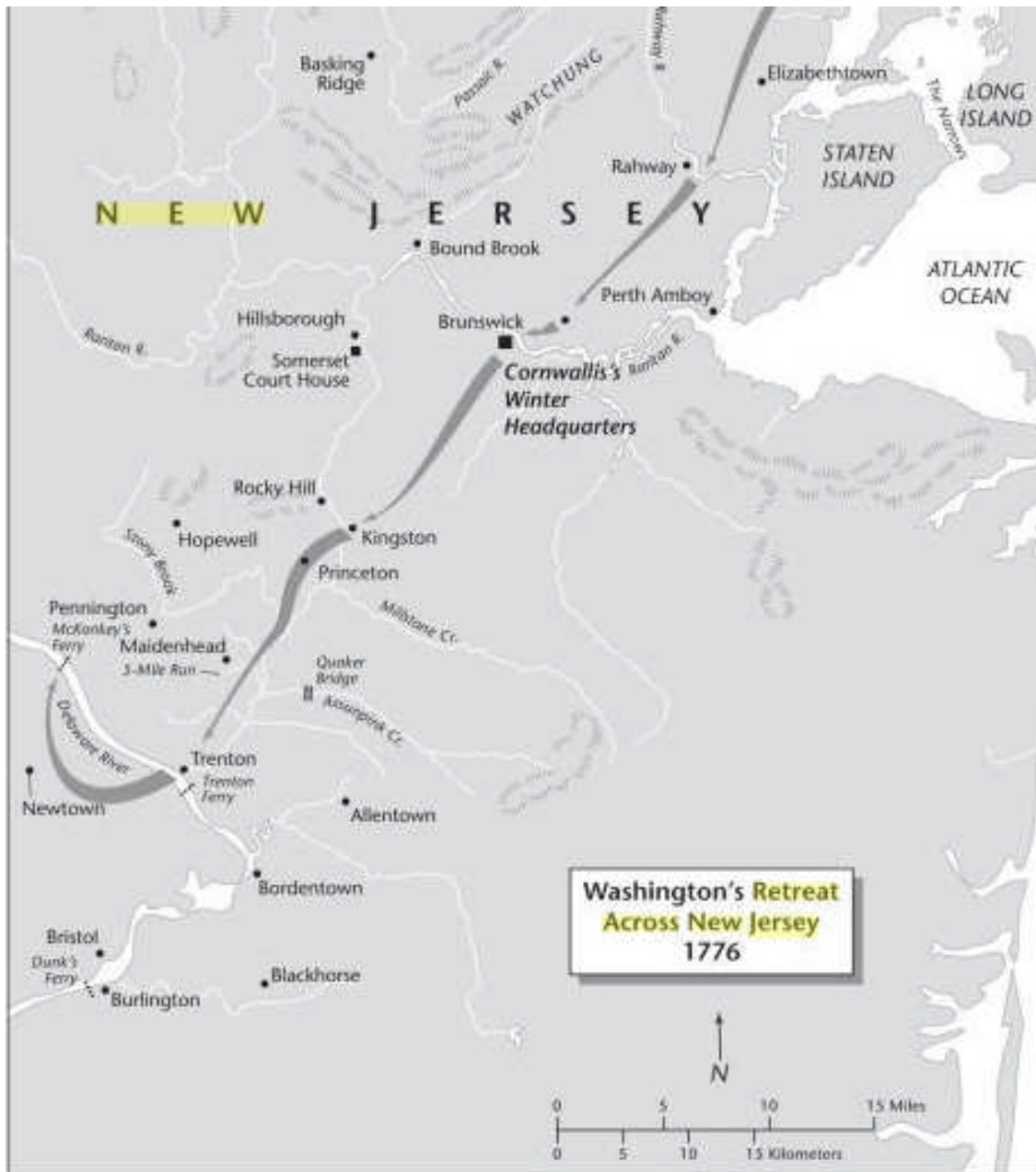
On June 15, 1775, Congress appointed the Commander-in-Chief of the American Army to be George Washington, from Virginia. He immediately left for Boston to assume his new command. The Battle of Bunker Hill (Breed's Hill) took place two days later on June the 17th. General George Washington arrived at Cambridge, MA on July 2nd. Assumed command from General Ward the following day. When winter arrived that year, the American forces were still besieging the British in Boston.

The British abandoned Boston on March 17, 1776. They loaded their troops onto ships in Boston and sailed out of the harbor. Their immediate destination was unknown. However, it turned out to be New York. Meanwhile, Washington having anticipated this had moved to that city ahead of them and prepared to defend it against them.

This did not turn out to be such a good idea. As a matter of fact, it was disastrous! In a series of battles which Washington lost everyone, his 20,000 man army was reduced to about 2,500 men.

2. Winter of 1776-1777 – Morristown, NJ.

The winter of 1776-1777 began with Washington's army fleeing across New Jersey for their lives. They reached the shores of the Delaware River in early December, 1776. Fearing entrapment and annihilation, they commandeered every boat on the river they could find and ferried their troops to the Pennsylvania side and relative safety -- at least, temporarily.



This crossing over to the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware (south side) was on December 8th, 5 miles north of Trenton. His troops camped at McKonkey's farm and he headquartered nearby at Morrisville, PA.

However, Washington knew that when the Delaware River froze over, the British would be able to simply walk across and end the war.

From his temporary quarters at Morrisville near the river, Washington personally reconnoitered the Hessians across the river in Trenton. He made a bold plan to attack them.



On the night of Christmas Day, Washington crossed back over the Delaware with 2,400 men and the following morning attacked the 1,500 man garrison of Hessians at Trenton, NJ. This was a small victory, but it was the first. The decisiveness of that victory, no matter how small, buoyed the morale of the troops. The following week they followed up with a similar victory at Princeton a few miles north of Trenton. They then entered their winter encampment (a little later than was customary) on January 6, 1777 at Morristown, NJ. From this location, the Americans could observe the British in New York City. And, for this reason, Morristown was selected twice more during the war as a winter encampment.

They left the Morristown winter encampment on May 28, 1777.

3. Winter of 1777-1778 – Valley Forge, PA.

After the humiliations of Trenton and Princeton, the British began the campaign in 1777 by sailing an army out of New York, down the coast, and up the Chesapeake Bay to try a “back door” approach to capture Philadelphia. After another series of disastrous defeats at Brandywine and Germantown, Washington was outmaneuvered and lost Philadelphia to the British. He entered the winter encampment at Valley Forge on December 19, 1777. That winter was marked by the arrival of Baron Von Steuben, a Prussian who had come to help the cause. And, although he could not speak a word of English, he taught and trained (through interpreters) the Continental Army to be a well disciplined and cohesive unit with the capability to fight in the European manner.

Washington’s new army left the winter encampment at Valley Forge exactly six months to the day after it had entered it – on June 19, 1778. Nine days later, they caught up with the British at Monmouth Courthouse in New Jersey. The ensuing battle was technically a draw,

but in the end the British relinquished the field. And, the battle has always been considered an American victory.

While the Battle of Saratoga has been considered by most historians to be the turning point of the war, the Battle of Monmouth has several things that Saratoga did not. First, this was the first victory of the main American Army over the main British Army. Saratoga had pitted smaller, different elements of these armies against each other. And, the 2nd team, as it were, in leadership was present there. At Monmouth the 1st team from both sides clashed and for the first time the Americans came out on top.

Twelve days later the French declared war on Great Britain.

4. Winter of 1778-1779 – Middlebrook, NJ.

Washington began his 1778-1779 winter encampment in November of 1778 at Middlebrook, NJ. Middlebrook was near Newark, NJ and not far from New York City.

During this encampment, on December 29th, a British expeditionary force, far to the south, captured Savannah, GA. And, thus began the Southern Campaign.

The Continental Army left their winter encampment at Middlebrook in May, 1779.

5. Winter of 1779-1780 – Morristown, NJ.

During 1779, the war spread across the globe and became a World War. On April 12th, Spain allied with France and declared war on Britain.

The Continental Army entered its 5th winter encampment at Morristown, NJ on December 1st. During that winter encampment, they suffered far worse weather and lack of supplies than they had at Valley Forge. But, by this time they had become a better army and able to sustain themselves under the harsher conditions – although, still, it was not easy.

The Continentals left the winter encampment on June 22, 1780.

6. Winter of 1780-1781 – Morristown, NJ.

As the emphasis in the war had shifted to the South, Washington continued to stand outside New York City and hold the British in the city.

They entered winter encampments that year in December 1780 at several locations around the city of New York – in the Hudson Highlands, Pompton, NJ, and, again at Morristown. This disbursement was done to avoid some of the problems of the previous year where they were all located together at Morristown. It also gave them a greater area to forage for food.

This decision was only partially successful in avoiding problems. In January, they had a mutiny amongst the Pennsylvania and New Jersey troops over pay and enlistment grievances.

7. Winter of 1781-1782 – Philadelphia, PA.

After the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown on October 19, 1781, the British were for all practical purposes done in America. But, the war did drag on for another two years.

However, the winter accommodations for this year were far better than they had known before. They spent this year in Philadelphia.

8. Winter of 1782-1783 – Hudson Valley, NY.

In preparation for attacking the British in New York in the spring of 1783, Washington chose his winter encampment in the nearby Hudson Valley in NY. His attack on New York was not necessary.

On April 19, 1783, Washington declared an end to the fighting – eight years to the day since it began on Lexington Green.

The war officially ended September 3, 1783 with the signing of the Treaty of Paris.

On November 25th the British finally evacuated New York. Washington bid farewell to his officers at Fraunces Tavern in New York City on December 4th.

He resigned his commission to Congress in Annapolis, MD on December 23rd. He arrived home to Mt. Vernon on Christmas Eve – eight years after he had promised Martha, “I’ll be home by Christmas!”

Conclusion.

In conclusion, it appears that Washington only spent **one** winter at Valley Forge. However, it was the crucial winter in which the so-called army became a real army and he became the great leader we know today. In the snows of Valley Forge, began the climb to victory in the war.