



Day 31: American Revolution

Winter at Valley Forge

Winter at Valley Forge: Suffering, Survival, and Transformation

Time: 60–75 minutes

Grade Range: Upper elementary–middle school

Unit: American Revolution

Lesson Overview

This lesson examines the winter encampment at Valley Forge as a moment of extreme hardship that ultimately strengthened the Continental Army. Using a teacher-led PowerPoint as the anchor, students analyze the suffering endured by soldiers, the causes of disease and starvation, and the transformation of the army after the arrival of **Baron von Steuben**. Students then apply their understanding through an immersive writing activity in which they assume the role of a soldier writing a letter home.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Explain why Valley Forge was chosen as a winter encampment
- Describe the living conditions and challenges faced by the Continental Army
- Analyze how leadership and training improved morale and effectiveness
- Demonstrate historical understanding through narrative writing

Materials

- **PowerPoint: Winter at Valley Forge (1777–1778)** (anchor)
- Article: **Valley Forge**
- Writing activity: *Letter from Valley Forge*
- Optional reading comprehension exercises:
 - Valley Forge
 - Baron von Steuben
- Optional creative activity: *Valley Forge Restaurant Menu*

Anchor Activity

PowerPoint Presentation (30–35 minutes)

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/revwar/valleyforge.pptx>

Below is a **detailed slide-by-slide teacher script** designed to expand and clarify each slide's content.

Slide 1 – Winter at Valley Forge (1777–1778)

Teacher Script:

“Valley Forge is remembered not because of a battle, but because of endurance. This winter tested whether the American Revolution could survive at all.”

Slide 2 – Warfare and Winter

Teacher Script:

“In the 1700s, armies usually stopped fighting during winter. Instead, they set up camps and focused on survival. Valley Forge became famous because the conditions there were especially severe.”

Slide 3 – Choosing Valley Forge

Teacher Script:

George Washington chose Valley Forge because it was defensible and far enough from British forces in Philadelphia to avoid surprise attacks. Geography played a critical role in military decision-making.”

Slide 4 – British in Philadelphia**Teacher Script:**

“The British occupied Philadelphia, forcing Washington to keep his army close but safe. Valley Forge allowed him to monitor the enemy without risking destruction.”

Slide 5 – A Crumbling Army**Teacher Script:**

“When the army arrived, it was already weak. Many soldiers were exhausted, hungry, and discouraged after months of defeat.”

Slide 6 – Lack of Food**Teacher Script:**

“Food shortages were severe. Soldiers often survived on ‘firecake,’ a simple mixture of flour and water. Hunger was constant and morale suffered.”

Slide 7 – Lack of Clothing**Teacher Script:**

“Many soldiers lacked coats, blankets, or shoes. Some left bloody footprints in the snow. Exposure to cold caused illness and death.”

Slide 8 – Harsh Living Conditions**Teacher Script:**

“Over 1,000 huts were built, but rain and melting snow soaked everything. Staying dry was nearly impossible.”

Slide 9 – Disease and Death**Teacher Script:**

“Unsanitary conditions allowed diseases like typhoid and pneumonia to spread rapidly. More than 2,000 soldiers died—most from sickness, not combat.”

Slide 10 – Wounded Soldiers

Teacher Script:

“Injured soldiers were especially vulnerable. Cold weather and limited medical care meant wounds often became fatal.”

Slide 11 – Arrival of Baron von Steuben

Teacher Script:

“In February 1778, Baron von Steuben arrived. Though he spoke little English, he brought professional military training that the army desperately needed.”

Slide 12 – Training the Army

Teacher Script:

“Von Steuben taught soldiers how to march, fight, and use bayonets effectively. His drills standardized the army and built discipline.”

Slide 13 – Leadership Style

Teacher Script:

“Unlike many officers, von Steuben trained alongside the soldiers. His hands-on leadership boosted morale and earned respect.”

Option - Pause the presentation to present a biography on Baron Von Steuben

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/revolutionary-war/people-of-the-revolutionary-war/baron-von-steuben>

Slide 14 – A Stronger Army Emerges

Teacher Script:

“By spring, the Continental Army was more confident, disciplined, and prepared to face the British as equals.”

Slide 15 – Leaving Valley Forge

Teacher Script:

"In June 1778, the army left Valley Forge stronger than when it arrived. What began as a season of suffering ended as a turning point."

Guided Reading (10–15 minutes)

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/revolutionary-war/battles-of-the-revolutionary-war/winter-at-valley-forge-1777-1778>

Students read the **Valley Forge article** (teacher-read, partner, or independent).

Focus Questions:

- What made Valley Forge especially difficult?
- How did leadership affect survival and morale?

Writing Activity: *Letter from Valley Forge* (20–25 minutes)

Student Directions

Research the winter of 1777–1778 at Valley Forge. Then, compose a letter to a real or imaginary loved one as if you were a soldier wintering at Valley Forge.

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/revolutionary-war/revolutionary-war-writing-activities/letters-from-valley-forge>

In your letter, be sure to:

- Describe living conditions (food, clothing, shelter)
- Explain the suffering you witnessed or experienced
- Describe how morale changed after the arrival of Baron von Steuben

Encourage vivid detail, emotional reflection, and historical accuracy.

Optional Extension Activities

Option 1: Reading Comprehension

- [Valley Forge Printable Reading Comprehension](#) - Lexile 1100
- [Valley Forge Printable Reading Comprehension](#) - Lexile 900
- [Valley Forge Online Reading Comprehension](#) - Lexile 1100
- [Baron Von Steuben Printable Reading Comprehension](#) - Lexile 1000
- [Baron Von Steuben Online Reading Comprehension](#) - Lexile 1000

Option 2: Creative Menu Activity – *Valley Forge Restaurant*

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/revolutionary-war/fun-printables-of-the-revolutionary-war/the-valley-forge-menu>

Students pretend they are historians creating an “authentic” restaurant outside Valley Forge.

Pretend you are a historian who aims to give customers “authentic” historical experiences. You set up a “restaurant” outside of Valley Forge promising patrons the actual food experiences of Valley Forge soldiers. Create a menu using the foods above for your customers to choose from. Add pictures and make the descriptions of the food sound as delicious as possible. Name your restaurant and your selections. The first page is the cover of your menu that includes the name of your establishment and a colorful design. The next two pages are for your food items, descriptions, and prices.

Requirements:

- **Page 1:** Cover with restaurant name and colorful design
- **Pages 2–3:** Menu items based on Valley Forge foods
 - Descriptions should sound appealing
 - Include prices and illustrations

Closure (5 minutes)

Discussion prompts:

- Why is Valley Forge remembered as a success despite the suffering?
- How did leadership and perseverance shape the outcome of the war?

Emphasize that **Valley Forge did not win a battle—but it saved an army.**