

A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF VALLEY FORGE INDUSTRY

Sue Andrews

If you drive north on Route 252 from the covered bridge to Route 23 you see nothing but grass and trees and Valley Creek meandering along toward the Schuylkill River. At the traffic light you will have to go either right toward Valley Forge National Historical Park or left toward Phoenixville. At this intersection there is little to see—only the "Bake House." A little further east along Route 23, a road off to the left leads toward the back of Washington's Headquarters and to the large stone station of the former Philadelphia and Reading Railroad. An earlier road leading to the front of the Headquarters was closed about thirty years ago. A few centuries of industry have come and gone from this small area.

IN THE BEGINNING

The land that included Valley Forge—more than 2000 acres—was acquired by Evan ap [Welsh for "son of] Bevan of Radnorshire, Wales in about 1686. His son, Stephen Evans, and Lewis Walker, a son of Isaac Walker, built the first iron forge in Pennsylvania. In 1719 the property was sold to John Potts of Burlington, New Jersey.

One hundred years before the winter encampment of 1777 -1778, this area had a number of successful industries—a store, grist mill, saw mill, blacksmith, and wheelwright—that were patronized by local farmers.

INDUSTRIAL PERIOD

By the middle of 1776, David Potts and Wil-

liam Dewees owned a total of 1,068 acres in this area.

Mount Joy Forge, built on the east side of Valley Creek, was owned and operated by the Potts family members until it was burned by the British in 1777. The iron it used came from Warwick Furnace near French Creek State Park.

In 1794 Isaac Potts sold Washington's Headquarters to Jacob Paul of Germantown. His son, Joseph Paul, sold it to a socialistic association called the "Community of Mutual Interests." It was unsuccessful. The wealthiest man in the group, James Jones, bought the others out and lived in the Headquarters building until he died in 1840.

Several old army buildings remained standing on the Chester County side of Valley Creek and John and Isaac Potts started a slitting mill in one of them near the end of the 18th century. In 1814 the property passed to John Rogers and Joseph Malin. Around 1820 the slitting mill was enlarged and rebuilt and a three-story stone building was erected to manufacture hardware.

There was not enough revenue in the hardware trade and the mill became a saw factory after a few years, operated by James Wood in connection with a rolling mill he built. Then the slitting mill was used by a gunmaker from Sheffield, England who manufactured 20,000 muskets for the United States government. The gunmaker added two stories to the mill. The rolling mill was washed away by a Valley

Creek overflow, or freshet, and this was the end of metal working in Valley Forge. Around 1830 the stone mill was turned into a cotton factory, producing bed ticking and other cotton products in large quantities. The mill was in operation until 1857, when the business failed, and then stood empty for four years.

In 1859 a history of Montgomery County reported that on the east side of Valley Creek, in Montgomery County, there was Charles Rogers' cotton factory, a grist mill, a store, a hotel, and 10 houses. On the Chester County, or west, side of Valley Creek there was Thropp's cotton factory, a store, a post office, and 15 houses. There were two dams, one belonging to the cotton factory and the other to the grist mill.

Charles H. Rogers, a nephew of John Rogers, was the wealthiest property owner in this area in the middle of the 19th century. In addition to the cotton factory, he owned the store and all the property on the Montgomery County side of Valley Creek south of Route 23. He built an observatory on Mount Joy and a fine house for his family. The observatory blew down in 1861. Another tower was built in the 1920s and it was torn down in the 1980s for safety reasons.

During the Civil War Joseph Shaw manufactured woolen fabrics for the government at the stone mill. From the 1860s until 1882 mill workers lived in a row of stone tenements across from the mill on the east side of the road that would eventually become Route 252. A pulp and paper mill near the Creek and a shoddy mill further away near the railroad station also provided employment. At that time Valley Forge was one of the most prosperous manufacturing villages in eastern Pennsylvania.

Then, one by one, the mills closed. They could not compete with the industries along the Schuylkill River near Philadelphia and when the pulp and paper mill moved away and the other businesses were abandoned, the village sank into rural obscurity.

LATER TIMES

Edward Ten Broeck shared several of his memories growing up in the Valley Forge area around 1903 when his family moved there when he was around 8 years old. He remembers that the road along Valley Creek was not much higher than the Creek and that his father would some-

times have to drive to the Valley Forge station "through water up to the floor of the buggy." He remembers quite well "the ruins of two old stone factory buildings between the Creek and the road ... [and that their] walls were at that time decorated with lurid posters of Pawnee Bill's Wild West Shows."

Ten Broeck says the houses for the mill hands on the east side of the creek road had completely disappeared by the time his family moved to Valley Forge. He describes how trees around the big lake caused by the dam were cut down to give a good view of the valley and the lake and that people often thought this view was of the Schuylkill River. And he says the "Martha Washington Spring" was in use when he first moved there and "... many people stopped there for water. But little by little it was first fixed up with masonry and finally closed off and now has practically disappeared. It was at the lower end of the lake that I described earlier."

SOURCES

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