

BOOK REVIEW

Following the Drum: Women at the Valley Forge Encampment. Nancy K. Loane.
Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2009. 205 pages + 8 pages of illustrative plates. \$29.95.

Encampments were periods between Revolutionary War battles when General Washington moved his troops during the winter months to locations where they could rest and practice maneuvers. No fighting occurred during the eight encampments of the War. Valley Forge, the third encampment, took place between December 19, 1777 and June 19, 1778 and is important because Baron von Steuben arrived and transformed a ragtag group of state militias into a unified, disciplined Continental Army.

Ms. Loane, former ranger and costumed interpretive volunteer at Valley Forge National Historical Park, has researched a very large body of primary sources—there are 28 pages of notes—to publish this comprehensive book about women at the Valley Forge and other encampments.



She has grouped the women who followed the War into three different categories. The first group of women were the ladies, and included Martha Washington and the wives of the senior and other officers of Washington's "family"—secretaries, aides-de-camp, guards, etc. General and Mrs. Washington lived in the very small former Isaac Potts house, which came to be known as Washington's Headquarters. Most military planning took place in this little building, which also served as the center of the social life for the officers and important local residents. Martha planned most of these social events and was the hostess at all the dinners and entertainments at Valley Forge for this group. It was quite common for wives to accompany their husbands to camp, and the author draws upon many letters written by these ladies to describe their personal daily life during this encampment: Catharine Greene, Lucy Knox, Rebekah Biddle, Lady Stirling, Alice Shippen, and others. Documented information about these ladies and their families is not easily found elsewhere.

Just as important to the functioning of the encampment were Washington's slaves and servants, and the cooks, laundresses, sewers, and nurses who were often wives of soldiers. Many of the latter were paid small amounts and given rations. There was also a housekeeper who was a valuable member of the "family" and who was well paid and looked after in her later years.

Finally, there were the approximately 400 destitute camp women and their "numberless" children who tramped into Valley Forge along with the army, because this gave them "their best chance for survival." Included here are wenches and whores. Washington issued directives about women found to be transmitting venereal diseases to the soldiers, but more important to him was the behavior of the camp women when the army was on the move. He also directed that women were not to be seen on or near the baggage wagons, although these orders seem to have been difficult to enforce.

The book ends with a remarkable appendix titled "Making the Myth of Martha Washington: Nineteenth-Century Fantasy vs. Eighteenth-Century Reality." Because of her importance in the social scene of her day, Martha Washington wrote a great number of letters, and Ms. Loane has examined them extensively in her research for this book. Using this documentation, she resoundingly refutes such nineteenth century writers as George Washington Parke Custis, grandson to Martha; Elizabeth Ellet, author of *The Women of the American Revolution*; and Benson John Lossing, a self-promoter of popular publications, to name a few, who portrayed Martha as a romanticized woman who visited the soldiers in their huts and extended comfort to them.

In addition to the details here about women at Valley Forge, Ms. Loane gives us many other fascinating general details about life in the camp among all of the social groups who were there.

Reviewed by Joyce Post