



## Gen. George Washington, Commander in Chief CORRESPONDENCE in the first years of the REVOLUTIONARY WAR, 1775-1778

What does it mean to be Commander *in Chief*? What duties and decisions are unique to the top military leader in a war? What ultimate responsibilities fall on the commander's desk? A close view is afforded by these selections from George Washington's correspondence during the first half of the Revolutionary War, from his appointment as Commander in Chief in June 1775 through the brutal winter of 1777-78 at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, to his strategic victory with a revitalized army at Monmouth, New Jersey, in June 1778. Read these excerpts not as a history of the war years but as a sampling of the life-and-death issues and the myriad of routine details that are the charge of a Commander in Chief.

April 17, 1775. Battle of Lexington & Concord  
June 15-16, 1775: Battle of Bunker (Breeds) Hill

### 1775. JUNE 18. Philadelphia. To Martha Washington, on his appointment as Commander in Chief by the Continental Congress.

I am now set down to write to you on a subject which fills me with inexpressible concern — and this concern is greatly aggravated and Increased when I reflect on the uneasiness I know it will give you — It has been determined by Congress that the whole Army raised for the defense of the American Cause shall be put under my care, and that it is necessary for me to proceed immediately to Boston to take upon me the Command of it. You may believe me, my dear Patcy, when I assure you in the most solemn manner that, so far from seeking this appointment, I have used every endeavor in my power to avoid it, not only from my unwillingness to part with you and the Family, but from a consciousness of its being a trust too far great for my Capacity and that I should enjoy more real happiness and felicity in one month with you, at home, than I have the most distant prospect of reaping abroad<sup>1</sup> if my stay was to be Seven times Seven years. But, as it has been a kind of destiny that has thrown me upon this Service, I shall hope that my undertaking of it, design'd to answer some good purpose — . . .

I shall rely therefore, confidently, on that Providence which has heretofore preserv'd & been bountiful to me, not doubting but that I shall return safe to you in the fall — I shall feel no pain from the Toil or the danger of the Campaign — My unhappiness will flow from the uneasiness I know you will feel at being left alone — I therefore beg of you to summon your whole fortitude & Resolution, and pass your time as agreeably as possible — nothing will give me so much sincere satisfaction as to hear this, and to hear it from your own Pen.

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<sup>1</sup> I.e., elsewhere; away from home.

**1775. JULY 4.** Headquarters, Cambridge, Mass.<sup>2</sup> GENERAL ORDERS to the newly-formed Continental Army.

The Continental Congress, having now taken all the Troops of the several Colonies which have been raised or which may be hereafter raised for the support and defense of the Liberties of America into their Pay and Service — They are now the Troops of the UNITED PROVINCES of North America, and it is hoped that all Distinctions of Colonies will be laid aside so that one and the same Spirit may animate the whole, and the only Contest be who shall render on this great and trying occasion the most essential service to the Great and common cause in which we are all engaged.

It is required and expected that exact discipline be observed and due Subordination prevail thro' the whole Army, as a Failure in these most essential points must necessarily produce extreme Hazard, Disorder and Confusion, and end in shameful disappointment and disgrace.

The General most earnestly requires and expects a due observance of those articles of war established for the Government of the army which forbid profane cursing, swearing and drunkenness, and in like manner requires and expects of all Officers and Soldiers, not engaged on actual duty, a punctual attendance on divine Service to implore the blessings of heaven upon the means used for our safety and defense.

All Officers are required and expected to pay diligent Attention to keep their Men neat and clean, to visit them often at their quarters and inculcate upon them the necessity of cleanliness as essential to their health and service. They are particularly to see that they have Straw to lay on, if to be had, and to make it known if they are destitute of this article. . . .

No Person is to be allowed to go to Freshwater pond a fishing or on any other occasion as there may be danger of introducing the small pox into the army.

It is strictly required and commanded that there be no firing of Cannon or small Arms from any of the Lines or elsewhere, except in case of necessary immediate defense or special order given for that purpose.

All Prisoners taken, Deserters coming in, Persons coming out of Boston, who can give any Intelligence — any Captures of any kind from the Enemy — are to be immediately reported and brought up to Head Quarters in Cambridge.

Sept.-Dec. 1775: Unsuccessful invasion of Canada (directed by Washington from his Boston headquarters).

**1775. NOV. 10.** Headquarters, Cambridge, Mass. To Col. William Woodford, on the essentials of military command.

The best general advice I can give, and which I am sure you stand in no need of, is to be strict in your discipline — that is, to require nothing unreasonable of your officers and men, but see that whatever is required be punctually complied with. Reward and punish every man according to his merit, without partiality or prejudice. Hear his complaints: if well founded, redress them; if otherwise, discourage them, in order to prevent frivolous ones. Discourage vice in every shape, and impress upon the mind of every man, from the first to the lowest, the importance of the cause and what it is they are contending for. Forever keep in view the necessity of guarding against surprises. In all your marches, at times, at least, even when there is no possible danger, move with front, rear, and flank guards, that they may be familiarized to the use; and be regular in your encampments, appointing necessary guards for the security of your camp. In short, whether you expect an enemy or not, this should be practiced; otherwise your attempts will be confused and awkward, when necessary. Be plain and precise in your orders, and keep copies of them to refer to, that no mistakes may happen. Be easy and condescending in your deportment to your officers, but not too familiar, lest you subject yourself to a want [lack] of that respect which is necessary to support a proper command. These, Sir, not because I think you need the advice, but because you have been condescending enough to ask it, I have presumed to give as the great outlines of your conduct.

<sup>2</sup> Near Boston. Washington took command of the Continental Army as it was maintaining the siege of British-held Boston, begun immediately after the Battle of Lexington and Concord (April 19, 1775).

**1776. JAN. 14.** Headquarters, Cambridge, Mass. To Lieut. Col. Joseph Reed, on the inadequate enlistments and provisioning for the Continental Army.

... We are now without any Money in our treasury — Powder in our Magazines<sup>3</sup> — Arms in Our Stores — We are without a Brigadier (the want of which has been twenty times urged) — Engineers — Expresses<sup>4</sup> (though a Committee has been appointed these two Months to establish them) — and by & by, when we shall be called upon to take the Field, shall not have a Tent to lay in — a propos, what is doing with mine?<sup>5</sup>

These are Evils, but small in comparison of those which disturb my present repose. Our Enlistments are at a stand [standstill] — the fears I ever entertain'd are realiz'd — that is, the discontented Officers (for I do not know how else to account for it) have thrown such difficulties or Stumbling blocks in the way of Recruiting that I no longer entertain a hope of completing the Army by Voluntary Enlistments, & I see no move, or likelihood of one, to do it by other means — In the two last Weeks we have Enlisted but about 1000 Men, whereas I was confidently bid to believe, by all the Officers I conversed with, that we should by this time have had the Regiments nearly completed — . . .

... I have often thought how much happier I should have been if, instead of accepting of a command under such Circumstances, I had taken my Musket upon my Shoulder & enter'd the Ranks, or, if I could have justified the Measure to Posterity & my own Conscience, had retir'd to the back Country & liv'd in a Wigwam — If I shall be able to rise superior to these and many other difficulties which might be enumerated, I shall most religiously believe that the finger of Providence is in it, to blind the Eyes of our Enemies; for surely if we get well through this Month, it must be for want of their knowing the disadvantages we labor under.

January-June 1776. British bombard Norfolk, Virginia, evacuate besieged Boston, fail to take Charleston, South Carolina, and prepare to attack Long Island, New York.

**1776. JULY 9.** Headquarters, New York, NY. GENERAL ORDERS, including the announcement of the Declaration of Independence.

The Honorable Continental Congress having been pleased to allow a Chaplain to each Regiment, with the pay of Thirty-three Dollars and one third per month — The Colonels or commanding officers of each regiment are directed to procure Chaplains accordingly: persons of good Characters and exemplary lives— To see that all inferior officers and soldiers pay them a suitable respect and attend carefully upon religious exercises: The blessing and protection of Heaven are at all times necessary but especially so in times of public distress and danger — The General hopes and trusts that every officer and man will endeavor so to live and act as becomes a Christian Soldier defending the dearest Rights and Liberties of his country.

The Honorable the Continental Congress, impelled by the dictates of duty, policy and necessity, having been pleased to dissolve the Connection which subsisted between this Country and Great Britain, and to declare the United Colonies of North America, free and independent STATES: The several brigades are to be drawn up this evening on their respective Parades, at six o'clock, when the declaration of Congress, showing the grounds & reasons of this measure, is to be read with an audible voice.

The General hopes this important Event will serve as a fresh incentive to every officer and soldier to act with Fidelity and Courage, as knowing that now the peace and safety of his Country depends (under God) solely on the success of our arms: And that he is now in the service of a State possessed of sufficient power to reward his merit and advance him to the highest Honors of a free Country.

Aug. 27, 1776: Washington is defeated in Battle of Long Island; retreats to Manhattan.  
Sept. 15, 1776: British capture New York City and invade New Jersey.

<sup>3</sup> I.e., gunpowder in our weapons storehouses.

<sup>4</sup> Expresses: mail delivery transports.

<sup>5</sup> I.e., speaking of, what is the progress on providing tents for my troops?

1776. SEPT. 25. Heights of Harlem, New York. To John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress.

We are now, as it were, upon the eve of another dissolution of our Army<sup>6</sup> — the remembrance of the difficulties which happened upon that occasion last year — the consequences which might have followed the change if proper advantages had been taken by the Enemy — added to a knowledge of the present temper and Situation of the Troops — reflect but a very gloomy prospect upon the appearance of things now and satisfy me, beyond the possibility of doubt, that unless some speedy and effectual measures are adopted by Congress, our cause will be lost.

It is in vain to expect that any (or more than a trifling) part of this Army will again engage in the Service on the encouragement offered by Congress — When Men find that their Townsmen & Companions are receiving 20, 30, and more Dollars for a few Months' Service (which is truly the case) it cannot be expected, without using compulsion, & to force them into the Service would answer no valuable purpose. When Men are irritated & the Passions inflamed, they fly hastily and cheerfully to Arms but, after the first emotions are over, to expect among such People as compose the bulk of an Army that they are influenced by any other principles than those of [self-]Interest, is to look for what never did & I fear never will happen. The Congress will deceive themselves therefore if they expect it. . . .

To place any dependence upon Militia is, assuredly, resting upon a broken staff. Men just dragged from the tender Scenes of domestic [family] life — unaccustomed to the din of Arms — totally unacquainted with every kind of Military skill, which being followed by a want of Confidence in themselves when opposed to Troops regularly train'd — disciplined and appointed, superior in knowledge & superior in Arms — makes them timid and ready to fly from their own Shadows. Besides, the sudden change in their manner of living (particularly in the lodging) brings on sickness in many, impatience in all; & such an unconquerable desire of returning to their respective homes that it not only produces shameful & scandalous Desertions among themselves, but infuses the like spirit in others . . . . To bring men to a proper degree of Subordination is not the work of a day — a Month— or even a year — and unhappily for us and the cause we are Engaged in, the little discipline I have been laboring to establish in the Army under my immediate Command is in a manner done away by having such a mixture of Troops as have been called together within these few Months.

Oct.-Nov. 1776. Americans are defeated at Valcor Island (Lake Champlain) and White Plains, New York. British capture Forts Washington and Lee on the Hudson River. Washington retreats to New Jersey.

<sup>6</sup> The militia enlistment period was near an end.

**from Washington's Staff Directives  
and Reports to Congress**

\_\_To the captain of the schooner *Harrison*, 20 Jan. 1776

Whatever prisoners you take must be treated with Kindness & Humanity—their private stock of Money & apparel to be given them after being strictly Searched, and when they arrive at any port they are to be delivered up to the Agent (if any there) if not to the Committee of Safety of such port.

\_\_To Congress, 14 Sept. 1776

. . . the pay now allowed to Nurses for their attendance on the sick is by no means adequate to their services—the consequence of which is that they are extremely difficult to procure, Indeed they are not to be got, and we are under the necessity of substituting in their place a Number of Men from the respective Regiments, whose service by that means is entirely lost in the proper line of their duty, and but little benefit rendered to the Sick.

\_\_To Congress, 5 May 1777

It is much to be wished that our Printers were more discreet in many of their Publications. We see almost in every [news]Paper, Proclamations or accounts transmitted by the Enemy of an injurious nature. If some hint or caution could be given them on the subject, it might be of material service.

\_\_To the Clothier General, 9 May 1777

I am convinced that we shall experience many inconveniences from our Soldiery being dressed in red. I therefore wish to have all the Clothes now on hand of that color dyed. I don't care what their color is.

\_\_To Congress, 10-11 October 1777

Our distress for want of Shoes & stockings is amazingly great—particularly for want of the former. On this account we have a great many Men who cannot do duty and several detained at the Hospitals for no other cause. I must request Congress to continue their exertions to relieve us and to direct every supply of these and other necessaries to be forwarded as soon as they possibly can after they are collected.

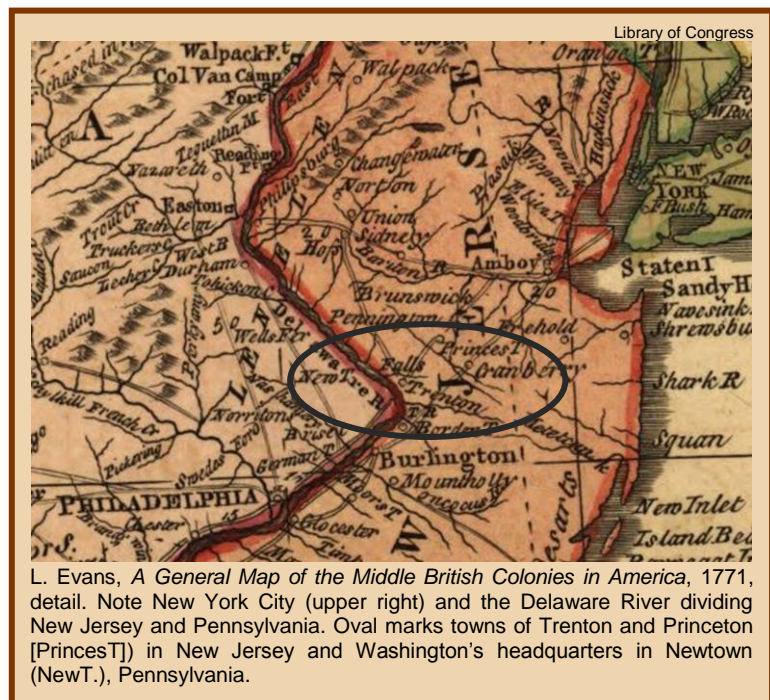


1776. DEC. 27. Head Quarters, Newtown, Pennsylvania. To John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress, on the Christmas-night crossing of the Delaware River and the morning attack on Hessian soldiers of the British army at Trenton.

I have the pleasure of congratulating you upon the Success of an Enterprize which I had formed against a Detachment of the Enemy lying in Trenton, and which was executed [done] yesterday Morning.

The Evening of the 25th I ordered the Troops intended for this Service to parade [march] back of McKonkey's Ferry that they might begin to pass as soon as it grew dark, imagining we should be able to throw them all over with the necessary Artillery by 12 o'clock [midnight], and that we might easily arrive at Trenton by five in the Morning, the distance being about nine Miles. But the quantity of Ice made that Night impeded the passage of Boats so much that it was three o'clock before the Artillery could all be got over, and near four before the Troops took up their line of march.

This made me despair of surprising the Town, as I well knew we could not reach it before the day was fairly broke, but as I was certain there was no making a Retreat without being discovered and harassed on repassing the River, I determined to push on at all Events. I formed my Detachment into two divisions, one to march by the lower or River road, the other by the upper or Pennington Road. As the Divisions had nearly the same distance to march, I ordered each of them, immediately upon forcing the out Guards, to push directly into the Town that they might charge the Enemy before they had time to form. The upper division arrived at the Enemy's advanced post exactly at eight o'clock, and in three Minutes after I found from the fire on the lower Road that that Division had also got up. The Out Guards made but small Opposition, tho' for their Numbers they behaved very well, keeping up a constant retreating fire from behind Houses. . .



Being hard pressed by our Troops, who had already got possession of part of their Artillery, they attempted to file off by a road on their right leading to Princetown, but perceiving their Intention, I threw a Body of Troops in their Way which immediately checked them. Finding from our disposition that they were surrounded and that they must inevitably be cut to pieces if they made any further Resistance, they agreed to lay down their Arms. The Number that submitted [surrendered] in this manner was 23 Officers and 886 Men. Col. Rall the commanding Officer and seven others were found wounded in the Town. I don't exactly know how many they had killed, but I fancy not above twenty or thirty, as they never made any regular Stand. Our Loss is very trifling indeed, only two Officers and one or two privates wounded. . . .

In justice to the Officers and Men, I must add that their Behavior upon this Occasion reflects the highest honor upon them. The difficulty of passing the River in a very severe Night, and their March thro' a violent Storm of Snow and Hail, did not in the least abate their Ardor. But when they came to the Charge, each seemed to vie with the other in pressing forward, and were I to give a preference to any particular Corps, I should do great injustice to the others.

1777. JAN. 1. Head Quarters, Trenton, New Jersey. To the Executive Committee of the Continental Congress (Robert Morris, George Clymer, George Walton).

The Accounts you give me, in yours of the 28th Ult.<sup>7</sup> of the good Effects that are likely to flow from our Success at Trenton, add not a little to the Satisfaction I have felt on that occasion. You are pleased to pay me many personal compliments, as if the merit of that Affair was due solely to me, but I assure you the other General Officers who assisted me in the plan and execution have full as good right to your Encomiums [praise] as myself. . . .

Yours of the 31st last Month encloses me sundry Resolves of Congress,<sup>8</sup> by which I find they have done me the honor to entrust me with powers in my military Capacity of the highest Nature and almost unlimited in extent. Instead of thinking myself free'd from all civil Obligations by this mark of their Confidence, I shall constantly bear in Mind, that as the Sword was the last Resort for the preservation of our Liberties, so it ought to be the first thing laid aside when those Liberties are firmly established.<sup>9</sup>

I shall instantly set about making the most necessary Reforms in the Army, but it will not be in my power to make so great a progress as if I had a little leisure time upon my Hands.

Jan. 3, 1777. Washington defeats the British at Princeton, NJ, his second definitive victory in ten days.  
Jan.-April 1777: Washington maintains winter quarters at Morristown, NJ, building his new army.

1777. MAR. 29. Head Quarters, Morristown, New Jersey. To John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress, on a visit from an Oneida delegation.

Mr. Kirkland, the Oneida Missionary, arrived here this Week with a Chief warrior and Five other Indians of that Nation. They had been to Boston and came from thence to this place to inquire into the true state of matters, that they might report them to a Grand Council to be shortly held. They said things were so falsely and variously represented by our Enemies through their Agents that they did not know what to depend on. I invited them to go to Philadelphia,<sup>10</sup> but they declined it, declaring they were well satisfied with what they had seen, and that they were authorized to tell their Nation [that] All they had heard from the Enemy was false. Being told that France was assisting us & about to join in the War, they seemed highly pleased, and Mr. Kirkland said he was persuaded it would have a considerable effect on the minds of several of the [Indian] Nations and secure to us their neutrality if not a declaration & commencement of Hostilities in our favor. I showed them every civility in my power and everything that I thought material to excite in them an Idea of our strength and independence. After staying Two days, they set off for their Nation . . . professing the most friendly sentiments towards us.<sup>11</sup>

**From Washington's GENERAL ORDERS, 1777**

In the present marching state of the army, every encumbrance proves greatly prejudicial to the service—the multitude of women in particular, especially those who are pregnant or have children, are a clog upon every movement. The Commander in Chief therefore earnestly recommends it to the officers commanding brigades and corps to use every reasonable method in their power to get rid of all such as are not absolutely necessary; . . .

4 August 1777

For the future the Commissaries are to Issue 5 Ounces of Soap for each Man per Week and if it should ever happen that they have not soap to Issue they are by no means to give money in lieu of the Soap allowed . . .

9 August 1777

All firing of guns is absolutely forbidden without license [permission] first obtained from the Major General of the day—and the instant a gun is fired, a sergeant and file of men shall be sent to catch the villain who is thus wasting ammunition and alarming the camp. All officers are strictly required to see this order put in execution.

11 October 1777

<sup>7</sup> I.e., in your letter of the 28<sup>th</sup> of last month.

<sup>8</sup> Congress voted Dec. 27 to give Washington “full, ample, and complete Powers” for six months in order to build a well-trained and permanent army with sixteen new infantry battalions, three artillery regiments, three thousand cavalymen, and a corps of engineers. Washington gained direct authority to commandeer provisions from private citizens (with payment) when necessary to supply his army, and to arrest anyone who refused to accept Continental paper money or were “otherwise disaffected with the American cause.”

<sup>9</sup> Washington is responding to Congress's trust that he would not abuse his authoritarian power. From the Executive Committee's memo: “Happy it is for this Country that the General of their Forces can safely be entrusted with the most unlimited Power & neither personal security, liberty or Property be in the least degree endangered thereby . . .”

<sup>10</sup> I.e., to meet with and inquire of the Continental Congress.

<sup>11</sup> The Oneida ultimately fought with the Americans, while the four other tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy fought with the British.

**1777. MAY 14.** Head Quarters, Morristown, New Jersey. GENERAL ORDERS.<sup>12</sup>

The Commander in Chief is pleased to approve the following sentences of the General Court Martial held at Col. Shrieve's quarters the 5th Inst [of this month], whereof Col. Ogden was president.

John Jones, for "Deserting from his guard to the enemy" — to suffer death — Execution whereof, is suspended 'till further orders.

John Whitebread, Richard Shaw and John Wood, of the 11th Pennsylvania Regiment, for "Desertion," are acquitted, and ordered to do duty as usual.

Lieut. Ross of the 2nd Jersey Battalion: charged with "Assaulting and using ungentee language to Capt. Anderson" — acquitted and released from his arrest.

Ensign Patterson of the 1st Virginia Battalion for "Refusing to do duty and leaving Camp without leave" — found guilty and cashiered [discharged] — Ordered to depart.

Thomas Avens of the 11th Pennsylvania Battalion for "Deserting from his post with intent to go to the enemy" — found guilty, and ordered to receive 100 lashes.

Sept. 11, 1777. Washington is defeated in the Battle of Brandywine,<sup>13</sup> which leaves Philadelphia undefended. Sept. 26, 1777. British occupy Philadelphia (until June 1778). Continental Congress moves to York, Pennsylvania.

**1777. OCT 3.** Head Quarters, Worcester Township, Pennsylvania. GENERAL ORDERS for the attack on Germantown, near British-occupied Philadelphia.

The troops to be ready to march this evening at six o'clock.<sup>14</sup>

The divisions of Sullivan & Wayne to form the right wing and attack the enemy's left — They are to march down Monatany road. The divisions of Green & Stephen to form the left wing and attack the enemy's right — They are to march down the Skippack road. General Conway to march in front of the troops that compose the right wing and file off to attack the enemy's left flank. General McDougall to march in front of the troops that compose the left wing and file off to attack the enemy's right flank. . . .

General McDougall to attack the right of the enemy in flank. General Smallwood & Foreman to attack the right wing in flank & rear. General Conway to attack the enemy's left flank & General Armstrong to attack their left wing in flank & rear.

The militia who are to act on the flanks not to have cannon.

Packs & blankets to be left, the men are to carry their provisions in their Haversacks or any other manner least inconvenient.

All the pioneers<sup>15</sup> of each division who are fit to march are to move in front of their respective divisions with all the axes they can muster.

Pickets<sup>16</sup> on the left of Vanderin's Mill to be taken off by Armstrong — one at Allen's house on Mount-Airey by Sullivan, one at Lucan's Mill by Greene.

Each Column to make their disposition so as to attack the pickets in their respective routs precisely at five o'clock with charged bayonets and without firing, and the columns to move on to the attack as soon as possible.

The Columns to endeavor to get within two miles of the enemy's pickets on their respective routs by two o'clock and there halt 'till four and make the disposition for attacking the pickets at the time above mentioned.

The Columns of Continental troops & militia to communicate with each other from time to time by light horse.

Proper flanking parties to be kept out from each Column.

<sup>12</sup> General Orders usually concluded with Washington's approval or rejection of courts-martial results.

<sup>13</sup> See "Brandy wine" creek, map, p. 8 (below PHILADELPHIA).

<sup>14</sup> Washington's troops consisted of about 11,000 men—about 8,000 in the Continental Army and 3,000 from state militias—commanded by six generals in addition to Washington.

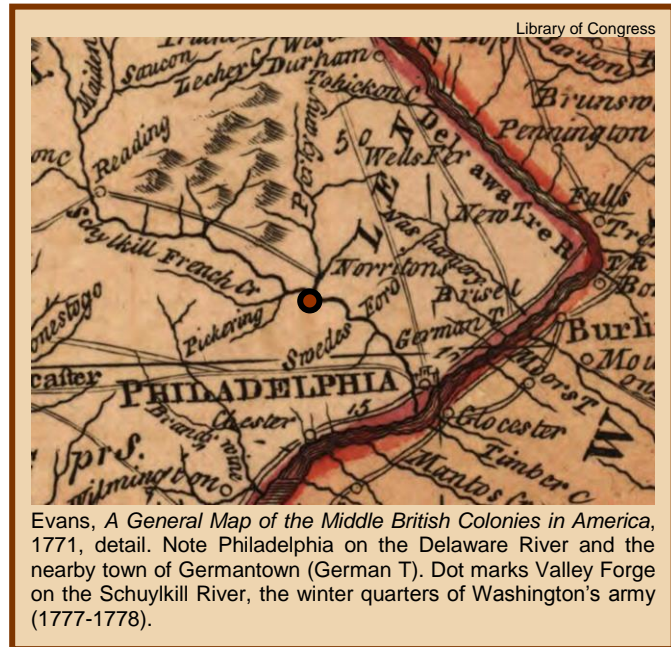
<sup>15</sup> *Pioneers*: foot soldiers who precede marching troops to clear the route.

<sup>16</sup> *Pickets*: sentries, i.e., British soldiers on lookout.

**1777. OCT 5.** Perkiomy, Pennsylvania. GENERAL ORDERS issued after Washington's defeat at Germantown during the unsuccessful campaign to retake Philadelphia.

The Commander in Chief returns his thanks to the Generals and other officers and men concerned in yesterday's attack on the enemy's left wing for the spirit and bravery they manifested in driving the enemy from field to field — And altho' an unfortunate fog, joined with the smoke, prevented the different brigades seeing and supporting each other, or sometimes even distinguishing their fire from the enemy's — and from some other causes which as yet cannot be well accounted for, they finally retreated — they nevertheless see that the enemy are not proof against a vigorous attack and may be put to flight when boldly pushed — This they will remember and assure themselves that on the next occasion, by a proper exertion of the powers which God has given them, and inspired by the cause of freedom in which they are engaged, they will be victorious —

The Commander in Chief not seeing the engagement with the enemy's right wing, desires the General officers who commanded there to thank those officers and men who behaved with becoming bravery; and such in either wing who behaved otherwise are to be reported.



**1777. OCT 5.** Camp near Pennibeckers Mill, Pennsylvania. To John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress, on the defeat at Germantown.

The Morning was extremely foggy, which prevented our improving the advantages we gained so well, as we should otherwise have done. This circumstance, by concealing from us the true situation of the Enemy, obliged us to act with more caution and less expedition than we could have wished, and gave the Enemy time to recover from the effects of our first impression; and what was still more unfortunate, it served to keep our different parties in ignorance of each Others' movements and hindered their acting in concert. It also occasioned them to mistake One another for the Enemy, which, I believe, more than anything else contributed to the misfortune which ensued. In the midst of the most promising appearances — when everything gave the most flattering hopes of victory, the Troops began suddenly to retreat, and entirely left the Field in spite of every effort that could be made to rally them.

Upon the whole, it may be said the day was rather unfortunate than injurious. We sustained no material loss of Men and brought off all our Artillery, except One piece which was dismounted [in brigade of soldiers not mounted on horses]. The Enemy are nothing the better by the event, and our Troops, who are not in the least dispirited by it, have gained what All young Troops gain by being in Actions. We have had however several valuable Officers killed and wounded — particularly the latter. Gen. Nash is among the Wounded and his life is despaired of. As soon as it is possible to obtain a return [report] of our loss, I will transmit it.

In justice to Gen. Sullivan and the whole right wing of the Army, whose conduct I had an Opportunity of observing, as they acted immediately under my eye, I have the pleasure to inform you that both Officers & Men behaved with a degree of Gallantry that did them the highest honor. . . .

P.S. As I have observed, I have not received a Return of loss, but from what [I have] just now learnt from Gen. Greene, I fear it is more considerable than I at first apprehended in Men.



**1777. OCT 26.** Head Quarters, Whitpain Township, Pennsylvania. Circular to the General Officers to discuss winter quarters, the loss of Philadelphia, and other issues.

You will very shortly be called to a council of War when your sentiments on the following questions will be asked.

- |                 |   |  |
|-----------------|---|--|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> | Whether it will be prudent in our present circumstances and strength to attempt by a General Attack to dislodge the Enemy [from Philadelphia]; & if it is and we [are] unsuccessful, where we shall retreat to?   | [Decisions at the Council of War, 29 Oct. 1777]<br><br>It will not [be prudent].   |
| 2 <sup>d</sup>  | If such an attack should not be thought eligible [advisable], what general disposition of the Army had best take place till the weather forces us from the Field [due to winter]?   | The army should take post on the ground a little to our left . . . and sufficient reinforcements should be sent to the garrisons of Red-bank and Fort Mifflin to complete the number of men requisite for their defense. |
| 3               | Where and in what manner, supposing the Enemy to keep possession of Philadelphia, had the Continental Troops best be Cantoned [stationed] after they can no longer keep the Field?  | Deferred.  |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> | What measures can be adopted to cover the country near the City and prevent the Enemy from drawing Supplies therefrom during the Winter?  | Deferred.  |
| 5 <sup>th</sup> | Will the Office of Inspector General to our Army, for the purpose principally of establishing one uniform set of Maneuvers and manual, be advisable as the time of the Adjutant General seems to be totally engaged with other business?  | Such an office is advisable . . .  |
| 6 <sup>th</sup> | Should Regimental promotion extend only to Captains, Inclusively, or to that of the Majority [Majors]?  | [Extend only to Captains]  |
| 7 <sup>th</sup> | Will it be consistent with propriety and good policy to allow Soldiers the reward offered to others for apprehending Deserters?   | The reward should be allowed to soldiers.  |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> | The Commissaries <sup>17</sup> Complaining of the number and disproportion of the Rations which are Issued to the Troops, and at the same time of the advanced price of all kinds of Spirits [liquors], owing to the Imposition of the Sutlers <sup>18</sup> upon the Soldiery, what regulation & Remedy can be applied to rectify the one and prevent the Other? | Deferred.  |

**1777. DEC. 14.** Head Qrs., Gulph Mills, Pa. To British General William Howe, requesting passage through British-occupied territory for American vessels delivering provisions to British prisoners from the Battle of Saratoga (Oct. 1777).<sup>19</sup>

The difficulty of supplying the Troops of General Burgoyne's Army with Wood and provisions from the Country in the Neighborhood of Boston induces me to request that you will grant passports for Vessels to be employed to bring them from places on the Coast. I cannot ascertain the number of Vessels that may be necessary for this business, or the names of the persons who may be entrusted with the command of them. The passports therefore should be blank. In such case they can be occasionally filled up, and to prevent any doubts of their being improperly used they may be countersigned by Gen. Burgoyne. This I shall direct. The Letters from Gen. Burgoyne, which accompany this, I transmit you by his request.

<sup>17</sup> *Commissaries*: military staff who provide food and supplies to an army.

<sup>18</sup> *Sutlers*: civilian (nonmilitary) merchants who sell food and provisions to troops.

<sup>19</sup> Commanders of opposing armies regularly communicated to schedule temporary truces, arrange negotiations, and, as here, to discuss prisoners.

**1777. DEC. 17.** Head Quarters at the Gulph, Pennsylvania. GENERAL ORDERS regarding winter quarters and the end of the 1777 campaign.

The Commander in Chief with the highest satisfaction expresses his thanks to the officers and soldiers for the fortitude and patience with which they have sustained the fatigues of the Campaign — Altho<sup>7</sup> in some instances we unfortunately failed, yet upon the whole Heaven hath smiled on our Arms and crowned them with signal success; and we may upon the best grounds conclude that by a spirited continuance of the measures necessary for our defense we shall finally obtain the end of our Warfare — Independence — Liberty and Peace — These are blessings worth contending for at every hazard — But we hazard nothing. The power of America alone, duly exerted, would have nothing to dread from the force of Britain — Yet we stand not wholly upon our ground — France yields us every aid we ask, and there are reasons to believe the period is not very distant when she will take a more active part by declaring war against the British Crown.<sup>20</sup> Every motive therefore irresistibly urges us — nay commands us to a firm and manly perseverance in our opposition to our cruel oppressors — to slight difficulties, endure hardships, and condemn every danger.

The General ardently wishes it were now in his power to conduct the troops into the best winter quarters — But where are these to be found? Should we retire to the interior parts of the State, we should find them crowded with virtuous citizens who, sacrificing their all, have left Philadelphia and fled thither for protection. To their distresses humanity forbids us to add — This is not all: we should leave a vast extent of fertile country to be despoiled and ravaged by the enemy, from which they would draw vast supplies and where many of our firm friends would be exposed to all the miseries of the most insulting and wanton depredation — A train of evils might be enumerated, but these will suffice — These considerations make it indispensably necessary for the army to take such a position as will enable it most effectually to prevent distress & to give the most extensive security; and in that position we must make ourselves the best shelter in our power —

**1777. DEC. 18.** Head Quarters at the Gulph, Pennsylvania. GENERAL ORDERS regarding preparation of winter quarters at Valley Forge.

The Colonels or commanding officers of regiments, with their Captains, are immediately to cause their men to be divided into squads of twelve and see that each squad have their proportion of tools and set about a hut for themselves. And as an encouragement to industry and art, the General promises to reward the party in each regiment which finishes their hut in the quickest and most workmanlike manner with twelve dollars — And as there is reason to believe that boards for covering may be found scarce and difficult to be got, he offers One hundred dollars to any officer or soldier who, in the opinion of three Gentlemen he shall appoint as judges, shall substitute some other covering that may be cheaper and quicker made and will in every respect answer the end.

The Soldier's huts are to be of the following dimensions — viz. [namely] — fourteen by sixteen each — sides, ends and roofs made with logs, and the roof made tight with split slabs — or in some other way — the sides made tight with clay — fireplace made of wood and secured with clay on the inside eighteen inches thick, this fireplace to be in the rear of the hut — the door to be in the end next the street — the doors to be made of split oak-slabs unless boards can be procured — Sidewalls to be six-and-a-half feet high — The officers' huts to form a line in the rear of the troops, one hut to be allowed to each General Officer, one to the Staff of each brigade, one to the field officers of each regiment, one to the staff of each regiment, one to the commissioned officers of two companies, and one to every twelve non-commissioned officers and soldiers.

After Orders. The army and baggage are to march tomorrow in the time and manner already directed in the orders of the 15th instant [of this month], Gen. Sullivan's division excepted, which is to remain on its present ground 'till further orders.

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<sup>20</sup> France entered the war on the American side in February 1778, declaring war against Britain in July of that year.

1778. JAN. 21. Valley Forge. To James Mease, Clothier General of the Continental Army, on providing coats and shoes for the soldiers.<sup>21</sup>

I this day rec'd yours of the 18th by Lieutenant Gamble<sup>22</sup> who has brought down 463 Coats ready cut out. I could have wished that had not been done, as I intended to have had them made up in a new fashion which I think will save Cloth — be made up quicker and cheaper and yet be more warm and convenient to the Soldier. I desire that all the remainder of the Virginia Goods may be immediately sent on in the State which you receive them, as soon as they arrive at Lancaster [Pennsylvania]. I will send you a Coat of the new fashion as soon as one can be made up, and I think it will be deemed most convenient and useful to dress the whole Army in the same manner. . . .

I beg you will exert yourself in procuring Shoes. It is evident that any quantities may be got by contracting to pay for them in Hides.

1778. JAN. 29. Valley Forge. To a Continental Congress Camp Committee.

The numerous defects in our present military establishment rendering many reformations and many new arrangements absolutely necessary, and Congress having been pleased to appoint you a Committee . . . I have in the following sheets briefly delivered my sentiments upon such of them as seemed to me most essential; . . .

Of Completing the Regiments . . .

If experience has demonstrated that little more can be done by voluntary enlistments, some other mode must be concerted [considered], and no other presents itself than that of filling the regiments by drafts from the militia. This is a disagreeable alternative but it is an unavoidable one.

As drafting for the war or for a term of years would probably be disgusting and dangerous,

### **From Washington's GENERAL ORDERS**

*in winter quarters at Valley Forge, 1777-78*

The Quarter Master General is positively order'd to provide straw for the use of the Troops & the surgeons to see that the sick, when they are remov'd to huts assign'd for hospitals, are plentifully supplied with this Article.

14 Jan. 1778

A Flag [of Truce] will soon go to the Enemy's Lines, those Persons who have any things to send to our Prisoners there must have them at the Commissary General of Prisoner's Quarters by next Saturday afternoon.

16 Jan. 1778

The General positively forbids the burning of the Farmers' Fences. He enjoins it upon all Officers to use their endeavors to prevent it & bring to severe punishment all those who shall offend herein.

20 Jan. 1778

The most pernicious consequences having arisen from suffering [permitting] persons, women in particular, to pass and repass from Philadelphia to camp under Pretense of coming out to visit their Friends in the Army and returning with necessaries to their families, but really with an intent to entice the soldiers to desert—All officers are desired to exert their utmost endeavors to prevent such interviews in future by forbidding the soldiers under the severest penalties from having any communication with such persons and by ordering them when found in camp to be immediately turned out of it.

4 Feb. 1778

The Commander in Chief is informed that notwithstanding His order of 12th of January last, the Carcasses of dead horses lay in and near camp and that the offal near many of the Commissaries' Stalls still lay unburied, that much Filth and nastiness is spread amongst the Huts which are or will soon be reduced to a State of Putrefaction and occasion a sickly Camp. Out of tender regard for the lives and health of His brave soldiery & with surprise that so little attention is paid to his orders, He again, in the most positive terms, orders and commands that the Quarter-Master General apply for men from time to time to bury such dead horses as shall lay at any considerable distance from Camp . . . . The Commanding officers of Regiments or Corps will immediately order their Quarter Masters to see their respective encampments cleansed, their old [privy] vaults filled and new ones dug once a week, all filth and nastiness buried and that fresh earth be flung into the Vaults twice every day—

13 March 1778

In future no guard in Camp is to be suffered to remain on duty more than forty eight hours without being relieved.

3 May 1778

The use of Drums are as signals to the Army and if every Drummer is allowed to beat at his pleasure, the Intention is entirely destroy'd, as it will be impossible to distinguish whether they are beating for their own pleasure or for a signal to the Troops.

9 May 1778

<sup>21</sup> "In a conventional army the commanding general did not have to concern himself with such matters, properly the concern of sergeants and lieutenants. Washington had few officers worthy of the name, and hence his general orders issued on a daily basis were filled with details about matters which should have been reserved for noncommissioned and junior officers." Robert Middlekauf, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (Oxford University Press, 1982, paperback ed., 1985), p. 303.

<sup>22</sup> I.e., Today I received your letter delivered by Lieut. Gamble.

perhaps impracticable, I would propose an annual draft of men, without officers, to serve 'till the first day of January in each year — That on or before the first day of October preceding, these drafted men should be called upon to re-enlist for the succeeding year, and as an incitement to doing it — those being much better and less expensive than raw recruits — a bounty of twenty-five dollars should be offered: . . .

### Of the Hospital Department

. . . one thing which has had a very pernicious influence is the continual jealousies and altercations subsisting between the hospital and regimental surgeons. They seem always to be at variance and recriminating [blaming] the sufferings of the sick upon each other. . . .

At all events, as the accommodation of the sick and the preservation of men's lives are the first and great objects to be consulted [dealt with], the regimental surgeons ought not to be destitute of a reasonable quantity of medicines and other conveniences of which the sick stand in need. The ill effects of it are many and glaring. Either men at every slight indication of disease must be sent away to distant hospitals, and the army unnecessarily deprived of the services of numbers who, if the means were at hand, might in a day or two be restored; or they must remain without proper assistance till their diseases confirm themselves and, with regard to many, get beyond the power of cure.

### Conclusion<sup>23</sup>

The enemy have set every engine at work against us and have actually called savages and even our own slaves to their assistance. Would it not be well to employ two or three hundred Indians against General Howe's army the ensuing campaign? There is a Gentleman now in camp who would, I imagine, be able to bring half that number of Cherokees, and I should think, the Reverend Mr. Kirkland<sup>24</sup> might be able to influence a like number of the Northern tribes. Such a body of Indians, joined by some of our woodsmen, would probably strike no small terror into the British and foreign troops, particularly the newcomers. The good resulting from the measure, if these savages can be kept in the field at so great a distance from their native haunts, would more than compensate for the trouble and expense they might cost us. . . .

The difficulty of getting wagoners and the enormous wages given them would tempt one to try any expedient to answer the end on easier and cheaper terms. Among others, it has occurred to me whether it would not be eligible [advisable] to hire negroes in Carolina, Virginia and Maryland for the purpose. They ought however to be freemen, for slaves could not be sufficiently depended on. It is to be apprehended they would too frequently desert to the enemy to obtain their liberty, and for the profit of it or to conciliate a more favorable reception would carry off their wagon-horses with them. . . .

. . . One thing we have suffered much from is the want [lack] of a proper gradation of punishments: the interval between a hundred lashes and death is too great and requires to be filled by some intermediate stages. Capital crimes<sup>25</sup> in the army are frequent, particularly in the instance of desertion. Actually to inflict capital punishment upon every deserter or other heinous offender would incur the imputation of cruelty, and by the familiarity of the example destroy its efficacy. . . .<sup>26</sup>

Upon the whole, Gentlemen, I doubt not you are fully impressed [aware] with the defects of our present military system and the necessity of speedy and decisive measures to put it upon a satisfactory footing. The disagreeable picture I have given you of the wants and sufferings of the army, and the discontents reigning among the officers, is a just representation of evils equally melancholy and important; and unless effectual remedies be applied without loss of time, the most alarming and ruinous consequences are to be apprehended [foreseen].

<sup>23</sup> Other issues in the lengthy memo include soldiers' pay and pensions, officers' promotions, regimental organization and improvement, cavalry and artillery levels and improvements, the duties and deficiencies of the non-combat departments (engineering, provisioning, etc.), and inadequate provision of clothing for the troops.

<sup>24</sup> Rev. Samuel Kirkland was a Presbyterian missionary to the Oneida tribe. See letter of 29 March 1777.

<sup>25</sup> *Capital crimes*: crimes punishable by death.

<sup>26</sup> I.e., to execute every deserter or serious offender would result in accusations of cruelty, and the routine use of the death penalty would destroy its power to restrain soldiers from deserting or committing serious offenses.



**1778. FEB. 16.** Head Quarters, Valley Forge. To George Clinton, Governor of New York,<sup>27</sup>  
on the dire need for meat and other provisions for Washington's troops.

It is with great reluctance I trouble you on a subject which does not properly fall within your province [as governor], but it is a subject that occasions me more distress than I have felt since the commencement of the war, and which loudly demands the most zealous exertions of every person of weight and authority who is interested in the success of our affairs — I mean the present dreadful situation of the army for want of provisions and the miserable prospects before us with respect to futurity. It is more alarming than you will probably conceive, for to form a just idea it were necessary to be on the spot. For some days past, there has been little less than a famine in camp. A part of the army has been a week without any kind of flesh & the rest three or four days. Naked and starving as they are, we cannot enough admire the incomparable patience and fidelity of the soldiery that they have not been, ere [before] this excited by their sufferings to a general mutiny and dispersion. Strong symptoms however of discontent have appeared in particular instances, and nothing but the most active effort everywhere can long avert so shocking a catastrophe.

. . . I am calling upon all those whose stations and influence enable them to contribute their aid upon so important an occasion, and from your well known zeal, I expect everything within the compass of your power and that the abilities and resources of the state over which you preside will admit. . . What methods you can take, you will be the best judge of, but if you can devise any means to procure a quantity of cattle or other kind of flesh for the use of this army, to be at camp in the course of a month, you will render a most essential service to the common cause.

**1778. MAR. 13.** Head Quarters, Valley Forge. To the Commissioners of Indian Affairs, on recruiting Indians into the service of the army.

You will perceive by the enclosed Copy of a Resolve of Congress that I am empowered to employ a Body of four hundred Indians if they can be procured upon proper Terms — Divesting them of the Savage Customs exercised in their Wars against each other, I think they may be made of excellent Use as Servants and light Troops mixed with our other parties.

I propose to raise about one half the Number among the Southern and the Remainder among the Northern Indians. I have sent Colonel Nathaniel Gist, who is well acquainted with the Cherokees & their Allies to bring as many as he can from thence, and I must depend upon you to employ suitable persons to procure the stipulated Number (about 200) or as near as may be from the Northern Tribes. The Terms made with them should be such as you think we can comply with, and persons well acquainted with their Language, Manners, and Customs and who have gained an Influence over them should accompany them. The Oneidas have manifested the strongest Attachment to us throughout this Dispute and I therefore suppose, if any can be procured, they will be most numerous. Their Missionary Mr. Kirkland seemed to have an uncommon Ascendency over them and I should therefore be glad to see him accompany them.

**1778. APR. 20.** Head Quarters, Valley Forge. To the General Officers, in preparation for leaving winter quarters and beginning the spring campaign.

There seem to be but three Plans which may be premeditated for the next Campaign — one, the attempting to recover Philadelphia and destroy the enemy's army there — another, the endeavoring to transfer the war to the Northward by an enterprise against New York — and a third, the remaining quiet in a secure fortified Camp, disciplining and arranging the army 'till the enemy begin their operations and then to govern ourselves accordingly — Which of these three Plans shall we adopt?

If the first, what mode of execution shall we pursue, and what force will be requisite estimating the

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<sup>27</sup> A friend of Washington and later vice president under Jefferson and Madison, Clinton often provided supplies for the troops at Valley Forge.

present numbers of the enemy in Philadelphia at 10,000 men, exclusive of marines and Seamen, whose aid may be called in? Shall we endeavor to effect the purpose by Storm, by regular approaches or by blockade, and in what particular manner?

If the second, shall we attempt to take New York by a coup de main<sup>28</sup> with a small force, or shall we collect a large force and make an attack in form? In either case what force will be necessary, estimating the number of the enemy in and about N. York at 4,000 men, and what disposition shall we make so as to effect the enterprise and at the same time to protect the country here and secure our Stores?

**1778. MAY 17.** Head Quarters, Valley Forge. To Major General Nathanael Greene, recently appointed Quarter Master of the Army.<sup>29</sup>

Every piece of intelligence [information] from Philadelphia makes me think it more & more probable that the Enemy are preparing to evacuate it — Whether they intend to leave the Continent or only go to some other part of it must be uncertain. There are some reasons that induce a suspicion they may intend for New York. In any case it is absolutely necessary we should be ready for an instant movement of the army. I have therefore to request you will strain every nerve to prepare without delay the necessary provisions in your department for that purpose.

The most pressing and immediate object of your attention will be the procuring a large number of Wagons for transporting baggage, provisions &c., and some good horses for the artillery. You will call upon this State and use every other mean in your power for a supply. . . Tents should also be provided and hastened forward with all possible speed, not only with a view to a general movement but also on account of the advancing hot season, from which we already begin to experience very unhappy effects, and have reason to apprehend worse if we keep the men much longer in huts. We probably have no time to lose, and I shall rely upon your exertions that everything will be done on your part to enable us to be prepared for events.

**1778. JUNE 29.** Head Quarters, Monmouth County, New Jersey. GENERAL ORDERS after the Battle of Monmouth Court House.

The Commander in Chief congratulates the Army on the Victory obtained over the Arms of his Britannic Majesty yesterday and thanks most sincerely the gallant officers and men who distinguished themselves upon the occasion and such others as by their good order & coolness gave the happiest presages of what might have been expected had they come to Action.<sup>30</sup>

General Dickinson and the Militia of this State are also thanked for the noble Spirit which they have shown in opposing the Enemy on their march from Philadelphia and for the Aid which they have given by harassing and impeding their Motions so as to allow the Continental Troops time to come up with them. . . .

The Officers of the American Army are to be buried with military honors due to men who have nobly fought and died in the Cause of Liberty and their Country. Doctor Cochran will direct what is to be done with the wounded & sick . . . The Army is to march from the Left, the Second Line in front, the Cavalry in the Rear — The march to begin at five o'clock this afternoon.

The Battle of Monmouth Court House was the last revolutionary battle fought in the northern states. The theater of war shifted to the southern states for the next three years, culminating in the surrender of British General Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia, on October 19, 1781. The final peace treaty with Britain was not signed until two years later, on September 3, 1783. Washington resigned his commission in late December 1783 and returned to his home at Mount Vernon, Virginia. Five years later, in January 1789, he was inaugurated as the first president of the United States under the new Constitution.

<sup>28</sup> *Coup de main*: surprise attack; quick attack without warning (French: literally, blow or stroke of the hand).

<sup>29</sup> Officer responsible for administering the provision and distribution of food and supplies for an army.

<sup>30</sup> The battle, which ended in a standoff, was a strategic victory for the Americans. Washington intended to resume fighting the next day but the British army withdrew during the night to continue its march to New York City. The performance of the Continental Army, which had trained relentlessly under Baron von Steuben at Valley Forge, greatly encouraged Washington. The 1778 spring campaign had begun.