

Valley Forge Over Time

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On May 7, 1937, there appeared in the *Evening Public Ledger* of Philadelphia a highly romanticized tale of the dogwood trees of Valley Forge. At a time when Americans were seeking security in the uncertain depths of the Great Depression, the anonymous author of this newspaper article brought the dogwood trees to life. One of the oldest of the trees took care to instruct the others:

“Listen, youngsters. You’ve got something of a tradition to uphold at Valley Forge. ... No, I didn’t see Washington’s ragged Continentals shivering in the snow. But my father and his father before him can tell you how our grand-daddies flourished on the hills of Mount Joy and Mount Misery during the Colonial War. Many of our fine dogwoods must have fed the campfires of Washington’s little army during the black Winter of ‘77. And our blooms in the Spring of ‘78 brought hope to the weary brigades.”¹

The trees could not uphold the tradition of Valley Forge alone, of course. Interviewed for the article, the park superintendent noted that “eternal vigilance” was necessary to keep the trees in good health. The trees themselves were reported to be waging a valiant battle against insect attacks.

The story seems overwrought and amusing, viewed in hindsight. But it allows us to enter into the dynamics of public memory at Valley Forge. Historic places are points of convergence

¹ *Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger*, May 7, 1937.

where past meets present, and where ideas about the past are created, preserved, and transmitted to the future.² This process is not as linear as it may appear to be, because standing at the point of convergence are people, individuals, or groups who have their own points of view, expectations, and understandings of history. They are not only consumers of an experience; they are contributors to the meaning of place, whether they are sight-seers, commemorators, demonstrators, newspaper writers, or casual passersby who might ignore entirely that which we consider “historic.”³

Viewed over time, Valley Forge has been a place where Americans have defined and defended their sense of nationhood. At Valley Forge, they have looked to the past for reassurance and inspiration, and they have worked hard to assure that a message of dedication to country and the value of sacrifice would be passed on to future generations. This work has often been the project of groups with a special affinity for this place; for example, members of hereditary societies who trace their ancestry to the American Revolution, or military veterans, or government employees whose job it is to communicate a defined significance of place. The work emerged in cultural contexts different from our own, but left lasting impressions on the landscape and on the public’s perception of Valley Forge and its history.⁴

At Valley Forge, Americans have worked very hard to build and defend national unity within a country of diversity. Today, we recognize that diversity was also embedded in the history of Valley Forge, but we might also consider how the echoes of less tolerant times may have permeated public memory. I am intrigued that political rallies were held at Valley Forge in 1844, the year of

² This role for relics is suggested by David Lowenthal in *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

³ On the politics of place construction, see Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

⁴ I develop this idea of the transmission of memory through buildings and landscapes in *Independence Hall in American Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

Philadelphia’s notorious anti-Catholic riots, a year marked by nativist street parades that prominently featured the words and image of George Washington.⁵ I also wonder about the picnic held at Valley Forge in 1873 by the Bethel Colored Church of Philadelphia, a congregation from a neighborhood of violent confrontations over the reassertion of African American voting rights after the Civil War. Was this simply a picnic in a pleasant spot in the country? Or a statement that these Americans, too, had made sacrifices for their country?⁶

We know more about the dynamics of unity and diversity in the nation of the early twentieth century. Valley Forge served as a bastion of patriotism during the transformative times of industrialization, high rates of immigration, and the challenges of the First World War. In 1900, when hereditary societies convened a meeting at Independence Hall to consider the future of Valley Forge, they observed, “One of the necessities of our time is to keep the spirit of patriotism alive in the hearts of all our people, a specially important duty in a country like ours, which has grown so rapidly and whose population is composed of so many different nationalities.”⁷

But Valley Forge also was a place where German-Americans turned to demonstrate their loyalty by honoring one of their own, von Steuben the drillmaster of Valley Forge. They honored von Steuben in the same manner that other ethnic groups of the early twentieth century demonstrated their loyalty by honoring such Revolutionary heroes as Barry, Pulaski, and Kosciusko.⁸

⁵ Lorette Treese, *Valley Forge: Making and Remaking a National Symbol* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State Press, 1995), 6.

⁶ Treese, 9.

⁷ Quoted in Treese, 55.

⁸ Treese, 71; Mires, *Independence Hall*, 204.

Holding the nation together also required endurance through hard times. Valley Forge has been a symbol of the endurance, a touchstone for later generations of Americans seeking assurance that they, and the nation, would endure into the future. As the flowering dogwoods might have told us (apparently), this was the case during the Great Depression. President Herbert Hoover visited Valley Forge for the Memorial Day ceremonies of 1931. Drawing parallels between the hardships of the past and present, he said, “No one who reviews the past and realizes the vast strength of our people can doubt that this is, like a score of similar experiences in our history, a passing trial. From it will come a greater knowledge of the weaknesses of our system, and from this knowledge must come the courage and wisdom to improve and strengthen us for the future.”⁹

National strength and endurance were hallmarks of Valley Forge during the Cold War, manifested especially in work to forge connections between young people and the nation’s history. The National Boy Scout Jamborees in 1950, 1957, and 1964 brought tens of thousands of young men into direct, physical contact to the past, with detrimental effects to the landscape, but in the hope of instilling a deep appreciation for the nation’s principles. As a journalist observed in 1963, “It doesn’t take much for a young man to imagine that the Colonials are still in residence. ... The shadows of greatness are still here in the log cabins, the old schoolhouse, Washington’s own small headquarters building. Once the kids have seen Valley Forge they never forget.”¹⁰ The scouts in 1950 received packets of Valley Forge dogwood seeds from the Governor of Pennsylvania, who predicted that the resulting trees would serve as a constant reminder of George Washington’s great sacrifice and accomplishments to win for us the blessings of freedom.¹¹ Even when the boys did not go to Valley Forge, Valley Forge followed them, in the form of a replica of the Washington

⁹ *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, May 30, 1931.

¹⁰ *Sunday Bulletin Magazine*, September 8, 1963.

¹¹ *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, June 1, 1950.

Memorial Arch constructed for the 1960 jamboree in Colorado.¹²

Strength and endurance operated on another level at Valley Forge during the Cold War through actions and episodes that suggested a greater variety of perception of the place and its history. Even as historic places give us anchors in the past, they also function as prisms, casting a spectrum of meanings that may challenge officially sanctioned interpretations.¹³ This was certainly the case in 1971, when Vietnam Veterans Against the War staged a march from Morristown, New Jersey, to Valley Forge, linking two highly resonant sites of the American Revolution with the contemporary struggle over the United States' involvement in Vietnam. Arriving at Valley Forge, the marchers were met by representatives of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, triggering an energetic exchange over the meanings of dedication and sacrifice.¹⁴

In a different vein, but perhaps also in the realm of contesting the memory of Valley Forge, is the ongoing recreational use of the park. Even as increasing effort has gone into marking, preserving, and communicating the history associated with Valley Forge, recreational activities suggest additional meanings are layered on this place. They may not be a denial of the historical significance of Valley Forge, but they suggest a dedication to the present as well as the past and to individual pleasures as well as the collective idea of nationhood. Perhaps they embody an idea of freedom, different from the experience of 1777-78 to be sure, but also part of the history and meaning of Valley Forge.¹⁵

¹² *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, July 1, 1960.

¹³ The conceptualization of historic sites as both anchors and prisms, even simultaneously, is developed in Mires, *Independence Hall*, Chapters 8 and 9. On the contest between official and vernacular memory, see John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

¹⁴ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 28, 1970, September 3, 1970, September 6, 1970; *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, August 13, 1970, September 1, 1970, September 6, 1970, September 7, 1970.

¹⁵ Treese, 156.

The symbolic meanings and commemorations at Valley Forge are not only lessons to be learned, they are ongoing processes. We may be able to reach an understanding of their history, but we cannot freeze them in time or in place. “Valley Forge” is not only a park in Pennsylvania, it is a U.S. Navy vessel based in San Diego.¹⁶ It is a line of furniture manufactured in Warrington, Pa., and advertised as “solid, strong, and representing the ultimate balance between strength and elegance.”¹⁷ It is the name of Chapter 1776 of the Sons of Italy, whom I saw marching in the Columbus Day parade earlier this week carrying a banner proclaiming “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.” On the Internet, Valley Forge has a place in the fan fiction of Star Trek, which imagines a fleet of Valley Forge-Class Cruisers constructed by the United Federation of Planets during a period of colonial downsizing in the twenty-third century.¹⁸

Historic sites remain vibrant when the public remains engaged in the complicated processes of attaching meaning to place. Over time, Valley Forge has represented the ideas of dedication, sacrifice, and endurance, at least to those Americans who made it their business to safeguard this place, and by extension to the many Americans who learned about Valley Forge in their history books, on family vacations, or by browsing the World Wide Web. I was asked to respond to the question, “What are one or two points the visitor should understand about the symbolic meanings and commemoration of Valley Forge?” My answer is a different form of the question: What can we learn from visitors about the symbolic meanings and commemoration of Valley Forge? How can we foster the continuing convergence between past, present, and future that truly defines the

¹⁶ U.S. Navy, History of USS Valley Forge (CG 50), <<http://www.sunpac.navy.mil/shipsnav/Forge/valcrest.htm>>, viewed October 14, 2002.

¹⁷ Bench Smith, Benches by Bench Smith-Valley Forge, <<http://www.benchsmith.com/valleybench.htm>>, viewed October 15, 2002.

¹⁸ Masao Okazaki, “Valley Forge-Class Cruisers,” The Starfleet Museum, <<http://www.ex-astris-screnua.org/sfmuseum/valleforge.htm>>, viewed October 15, 2002.

significance of a historic place? In addition to considering meanings to be delivered, let us also consider allowing meanings to unfold and flourish in less predictable ways. I would like visitors to understand that they are not passive consumers of the past; they are part of an ongoing process of defining what Valley Forge means to the present and what it will mean in the future. In doing this, they are active participants in the nation.