

Valley Forge before George Washington

(Part 2 of a Series)

The township will be running a series of articles on various points of interest throughout the township in upcoming newsletters.

At times a name is associated with a use different than its name indicates such as Valley Forge best known as the site of the winter encampment of General Washington and his troops from December 1777 to June 1778. Its name indicates some involvement in the production of iron.

On February 3, 1742, Stephen Evans and Daniel Walker of Treddyffrin Township purchased 175 acres of land from the attorneys of William Penn. This acreage was part of the "Great Tract" of the "Manor of Mount Joy"; land that had been given to Penn's daughter Letitia.

The acreage that Evans and Walker bought was about one half mile from where Valley Creek emptied into the Schuylkill River. They established the Mount Joy Forge for iron making. It was built along the east side of Valley Creek between what is now "Washington's Headquarters" and the covered bridge. The forge started operations on a full time scale about 1744. By this time the men had acquired a total of 376 acres - mostly timber which they used for making charcoal. The timber was felled on Mount Misery.

A saw mill was built and a third partner was added to the company. Little profit was made, and 14 years later, Walker sold his third of the forge. The partner was John Potts, son of Thomas Potts who was one of the pioneers of iron-making in Pennsylvania. By 1759, Potts had acquired the other two thirds shares and had made great improvements.

Mount Joy Forge, later Valley Forge was a refining forge which processed and purified pig iron. Pig iron is the first or raw iron. It is formed when iron ore is smelted in furnaces. Slag impurities float to the top and are poured off. The bottom molten iron is released into a trough made in a sand bed. This trough was lined with a row of depressions extending to each side into which the molten iron would flow, cool, and harden.

The pattern formed looked like a row of suckling pigs, thus the name "pig iron". The pig iron for Valley Forge was produced at Warwick furnace and transported by wagon. The wagon owners were paid by the ton, usually hauling four tons at a time. They traveled the path of Route 23, which was a main link between Philadelphia and Lancaster.

A portion of that, Nutt's Road (Nutt Road), was named after Samuel Nutt, the Coventry Forge Ironmaster. Nutt first traveled the roads when they were improved Indian trails. Mr. Nutt saw a means of shortening the journey by relocating the road to run straight through from French Creek to Valley Forge. Part of this stretch still bears his name.

The crude pig iron was remelted then formed into more refined bars to be shipped to Philadelphia. The forge was called a respectable small forge whose production was less expensive because it was run by slaves and servants.

The forge remained entirely in the Potts' family until 1771 when a Colonel William Dewees bought an interest. It was he who built the "Upper Forge" upstream and on the west side of Valley Creek. This was a bloomery forge, which removed sufficient impurities to produce wrought iron; malleable and tough enough to shape into barrel hoops and tools.

Early in 1777, the American Quartermaster General selected Valley Forge to serve as one of the Continental stores. Thousands of barrels of wheat, flour, tomahawks,

horseshoes and tools were moved into the forge and out buildings.

In September of 1777, a British detachment headed for Valley Forge from Brandywine. Warned of their approach, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Hamilton and a party of "Dragoon" tried to ferry the stores across the river. They did not have time and had to retreat to the cover of the thick wood of Mount Joy.

They were helpless and could only watch as the British carried off the supplies and destroyed the forge and other buildings. Only ruins remained at the time of Washington's encampment three months later.

After the war, the works were rebuilt and were maintained until 1824 when they were allowed to fall into disrepair.

Schuylkill Township would like to thank Robert S. Elmer, former director of the Great Valley Nature Center and Lois Donovan, a member of the Historical Society of the Phoenixville Area for the use of this article.

Did You Know?

Soon after Penn's founding of Philadelphia, settlers began to move westward along the Schuylkill River. The first white inhabitants in the area were a few Swedish and Holland dutch families. "Schuylkill" means "Hidden River" in Dutch. The area now known as Schuylkill Township was part of the Pickering Tract where Charles Pickering expected to mine silver. The attempts to do so ended in failure and in charges of counterfeiting against Pickering and an associate.

For other township facts, stop by the Township office and pick up a Community Information Guide.