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HARD WINTER

The winter of 1779-80 was very severe; it has been denominated "the hard winter," and hard it was to the army in particular, in more respects than one... *Private Joseph Plumb Martin*

ALL REPORTS INDICATE THAT THE WINTER OF 1779-80 IS THE WORST WINTER EVER KNOWN IN THE NORTHEAST UNITED STATES

David M. Ludlum in his book *Early American Winters 1604-1820*, in the chapter on "The Hard Winter of 1779-80" writes that it was "the most hard difficult winter....that ever was known by any person living. There has been only one winter in recorded American history during which the waters surrounding New York City have frozen over and remained closed to all navigation for weeks at a time...the Hard Winter of 1780."

According to Ludlum, January 1780 rated as the most persistently cold calendar month in the history of the eastern United States, and "The severity of the 1780 season reached all parts of the colonies. Reports from Maine southward along the seaboard to Georgia, and from Detroit down through the interior waterways to New Orleans, all chronicled tales of deep snow, and widespread suffering."

Ludlum believed that his research definitely showed that the season of 1779-80 in the eastern United States well deserved the name given to it by the people that experienced its effects.... *The Hard Winter.*

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS SUPPORT THIS BELIEF

William Smith (a loyalist living in New York City) records in his diary that on January 16, 1780, people were walking across the frozen Hudson River from New York to Paulus Hook (today Jersey City) New Jersey.

A Hessian soldier, Johann Dohla recorded in his diary on January 30, "The North (Hudson) and East rivers were frozen solid. The ice was checked and found to be eighteen feet thick. All ships were frozen in, and it was possible to cross over the North (Hudson) River on foot, riding or driving, without fear." Later, (on February 22) Dohla wrote "Today the North River ice began to break, after having been frozen for nearly seven weeks." A German officer, Major Baurmeister wrote, "The severe winter covered the North River with ice early in January; even where the current of the river is swiftest, the ice was eleven feet thick, in spite of the fact that it is 1,800 yards wide between Fort George (today Battery Park, New York City) and Powles Hook."

February 1780 seems to have been even colder: On February 10, William Smith mentions in his diary that a few days earlier a "24 Pounder" (that is, a cannon that fired a solid ball weighing 24 pounds—the entire cannon weighed three tons) was rolled across the Hudson River to Paulus Hook (today part of Jersey City, New Jersey.) Smith goes on to say that even a heavy load as this it

made no impression on the ice. On the night of February 10th, Smith heard that four to five hundred British cavalry rode their horses across the river

MANY ACCOUNTS MENTION UNPRECEDENTED CONDITIONS

A teacher in Yale College (New Haven, Connecticut) recorded approximately twenty days with snowfall, and a total of 95 inches of snow that winter. People walked across the Sound from Stanford, Connecticut to Long Island. Others walked from Rhode Island mainland to Block Island. Chesapeake Bay and the York River in Virginia froze over for the first time since Europeans settled there. Many people mentioned in letters that they could not remember a winter as bad.

> We have had the most terrible winter here that ever I know. Almost all the wild beasts of the fields, and the birds of the Air, have perished with the cold. All the Bays, Rivers and Creeks are froze up. (*General Nathanael Greene to Gov. William Greene of Rhode Island, February 10th 1780)*
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> The oldest people now living in this country do not remember so hard a winter af the one we are now emerging from. In a word, the severity of the frost exceeded anything of the kind that had ever been experienced in this climate before." *(General George Washington writing to the Marquis de Lafayette, March 18, 1780)*

THOSE WHO ENDURED THE 1777-78 WINTER AT VALLEY FORGE AND ALSO THE 1779-80 MORRISTOWN ENCAMPMENT BELIEVED THAT THE MORRISTOWN WINTER WAS WORSE

> Those who have only been in Valley Forge or Middlebrook during the last two winters, but have not tasted the cruelties of this one, know not what it is to suffer."
>
> *From letter written from camp by Major General John Kalb on February 12, 1780*

THERE IS MORE EVIDENCE FROM LETTERS AND DIARIES OF THE OFFICERS AND SOLDIERS WHO SUFFERED AT THE JOCKEY HOLLOW ENCAMPMENT.

The snow made it difficult for the arriving troops to build their huts.

> [I] expect, if good weather, to have the men's Hutts so far compleated *(sic)* that they may go into them on Sunday or Monday. The severity of the weather hath been such that the men suffr'd much without shoes and stockings, and working half leg deep in snow. Poor fellows, my heart bleeds for them…." *(Lt. Colonel Ebenezer Huntington of Col. Samuel Webb"s Connecticut Regiment, Stark's Brigade, December 24, 1779)*

From January 3rd to the 5th, a long and severe storm dumped feet of snow on the troops, and large snowdrifts on the roads prevents supplies of food entering camp.

> At one time it snowed the greater part of four days successively, and there fell nearly af many feet deep of snow, and here was the keystone of the arch of starvation. We were absolutely, literally starved. I do solemnly declare that I did not put a single morsel of victuals into my mouth for four days and as many nights, except a little black birch bark which I gnawed off a stick of wood, if that can be called victuals. I saw several of the men roast their old shoes and eat them, and I was afterwards informed by one of the officers waiters that some of the officers killed and ate a favorite little dog that belonged to them. If this was not "suffering," I request to be informed what can pass under that name. *(Joseph Plumb Martin, who endured the "Hard Winter" of 1779-80 as a nineteen-year old private in the Connecticut Brigade)*
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> Here we are surrounded with Snow banks, and it well we are, for if it was good traveling, I believe the Soldiers would take up their packs and march, they having been without provision two or three days. The distress of the Army is very great, and not less on account of clothing than provisions, hundreds and hundreds being without shirts and many other necessary articles of clothing….God have mercy on us, we have little to hope and

everything to fear....A few Cattle arrived this morning or else the Army must have disbanded or let loose upon the Inhabitants: the latter would have been the case; But you know how cautious the Gen[l] *[Washington]* is of taking desperate measures." *(General Nathanael Greene to Colonel Jeremiah Wadsworth, January 5th 1780)*

Due to the severe storm, the army was almost without food---General Washington had to send a letter to the leaders of the counties of New Jersey asking for emergency supplies to save the army due to the "early commencement and uncommon vigor of the Winter."

The present situation of the army with respect to provision, is the most distressing of any we have experienced since the beginning of the war. For a fortnight *(two weeks)* past the troops, both officers and men, have been almost perishing for want. They have been alternately without bread or meat the whole time, with a very scanty allowance of either and frequently destitute of both. They have borne their sufferings with a patience that merits the approbation and ought excite the sympathy of their Countrymen." *(General George Washington to the Magistrates of New Jersey, January 8, 1780)*

Our Affairs are in so deplorable a condition (on the score of provisions) as to fill the Mind with the most anxious and alarming fears (Men half-starved, imperfectly Cloathed, riotous, and robbing the Country people of their subsistence from shear necessity) *(General Washington describing the troops to General Irvine, January 9, 1780.)*

General Greene agreed that he had never seen such a bad winter and praised the troops at Jockey Hollow for their patience and strength in facing such hard conditions.

Such weather as we have had, never did I feel. For six or eight days it has been so extremely cold, that there was no living abroad; the snow it is also very deep, and much drifted; it is so much so, that we drive over the tops of the fences. In the midst of snow and surrounded on every side by its banks, the army has been cut off from its magazines, *(supply storehouses)* and been obliged to fast for several days together. We have been alternately out of meat and bread for eight or nine days past, and without either for three or four. The distress of the army has been exceedingly great from the weather, want of clothing and provisions. But the soldiers have borne it with great patience and fortitude. They have displayed a degree of magnanimity under their sufferings which does them the highest honour...." *(General Nathanael Greene to an Unidentified Perfon)*

According to General Washington, the last snowfall to fall at Morristown that winter was on April 1[ft]—and the effects of spring (with trees budding and warmer days) would not occur until a week into May.

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