

Washington's Headquarters



In December 1777, the Continental Army marched into Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, to rest and recuperate from a long and difficult campaign season. From there they could keep an eye on the British in Philadelphia, in the hope of stifling any British attempts to ransack the surrounding countryside. Most importantly they could train for the next campaign season. Within days, fortifications and trenches were established, and the construction of the log huts was underway.

During this period of transition, General Washington resided in a marquee along the inner line of defenses, close to Knox's Artillery, in what is now the center of the park. However, a marquee could not long suffice as the winter quarters of the Commander in Chief of the Continental Army. He needed a secure location for the discussion of major plans and problems, a building that could house what was effectively the "Pentagon" of the Continental Army during the encampment. One such home was identified as an ideal location for such an important group of military personnel and did not have to be shared with the owners' family. Defended on all sides by mountains, a river, and row upon row of log huts filled with soldiers, this house provided a secure location, though smaller than ideal for General Washington's needs.

The Isaac Potts House has the distinction of being known today as Washington's Headquarters. Constructed in 1768 by the Potts family, this summer and business residence reflects more the architectural style of a Philadelphia townhouse than the local farm houses of Chester County. The almost 250 year old structure is estimated to be 80% original to the encampment era.

The house was used by the Potts family, who ran the forge and mill businesses along Valley Creek in a partnership with other relatives until a British raid in September 1777 destroyed every business except the gristmill. Just prior to this event, Isaac Potts had vacated the premises and rented it to a family member, Mrs. Deborah Hewes. Mrs. Hewes in turn rented the house, along with all of its furnishings, to General Washington for £100 Pennsylvania currency. The British military custom of simply taking over a home violated Americans' sense of privacy and ownership. Therefore Washington sought to build support among the civilians by paying for his lodgings, and requiring his officers to do the same during the course of the war. Mrs. Hewes moved out, and most likely went to stay with other family members for the six-month encampment. General Washington moved in with his military family; an estimated 15-25 officers, aides-de-camp, and servants ate, worked, and slept in this two-story home. This included the personal servants of the aides-de-camp, and Martha Washington, who joined her husband at Headquarters in February of 1778, bringing with her an additional domestic staff, resulting in very crowded quarters.



Aides-de-Camp Office



The first room on the right was a beehive of activity. Washington's military aides, six to ten in number, used this room for the bureaucratic business of managing a war. The aides-de-camp were required to make three handwritten copies of each official document, using the implements available at the time including quills pens, inkwells, and sanders. At 2:00 P.M., every day the papers and documents were put aside and the tables pushed together and the English creamware removed from the recessed cabinet as the office was transformed into a dining room for the general and his aides. With all the officers together, Washington used this time wisely for group discussion and planning. In the evening, all furniture would have been pushed aside to make room for sleeping. No space was wasted when fifteen to twenty-five people shared a house of this size.



VAFO 30053, VAFO 30072, VAFO 30071 Chairs

Set around three tables are several types of informal chairs commonly used in 18th century homes. Light, durable chairs like these were ideal for use by the officers while copying documents and answering correspondence. The aides-de-camp that occupied these seats included John Laurens and Alexander Hamilton. At times the Marquis de Lafayette could also be found here. These long hours spent working and eating together helped foster a bond between these young men and Washington that lasted throughout their lives.

One of the first orders Washington issued upon moving in required all officers to "set their watches by the clock in the front room." A tall case clock, similar to this period piece, kept the officers synchronized. Made of walnut, this clock was built by Adam Brant of New Hanover Township, Pennsylvania between 1760 and 1775.



VAFO 3375 Clock



VAFO 92 Fireback; VAFO 3371 Andirons

A major source of light and heat came from the fireplace. A fireback such as this was placed behind the fire to protect the masonry at the back of the fireplace as well as to reflect heat back into the room. The fireback is decorated with relief designs which include tulips, hearts and stars, as well as the date "1763." The wrought-iron andirons, also known as "firedogs," kept the logs off of the hearth floor allowing for air to circulate around the fire.

Washington's Office



VAFO 2670 Table: VAFO 30043-30048 Chairs

In this room Washington would have met with his generals, and entertained the various important visitors that came to Headquarters, including committee members of Congress, sent to observe the condition of the Army, foreign ambassadors, foreign officers, local mayors, and prominent local inhabitants. A walnut Chippendale drop-leaf table served as a conference table, where General Washington would have met with his generals to discuss the status of the army and devise battle strategies. Built circa 1740, the drop-leaf was a popular design because it could be extended for company and folded away when not in use. The surrounding chairs are reproductions of the surviving chair borrowed from Mrs. Hewes.

A Queen Anne style secretary and desk served Washington as a place for keeping writing materials, as well as storing books; occasionally desks had a hidden compartment or document box for keeping private materials. On the desk is a pair of spectacles with oval lenses. Here Washington would have slipped on the spectacles to review orders he had issued or letters from his generals and Congress. Washington had once remarked, as he pulled out his spectacles, that he had not only grown gray in the service of his country, but also blind.



VAFO 30042 Secretary and Desk



VAFO 2674 Razor Box

Every morning, as was his custom at Mount Vernon, Washington would come down to his office, leaving his wife to sleep in peace. There he would perform his morning rituals, which included shaving. It was a time in which he could be alone, a rare situation when living in such crowded conditions. On this oval table, built circa 1750, is a shaving set, including a redware shaving jar, pitcher, and bowl. The razor case is marked G.W. in white letters on the lid.

Kitchen



VAFO 3386 Pot; VAFO 30200 Griddle; VAFO 3596 Toaster; VAFO 3412 Frying Pan

Adjacent to the main house is the kitchen. The Potts generally used the home during the summer months, so the additional heat the kitchen provided was unwanted; for this reason, the kitchen was separate, connected by a covered archway known as a 'dogtrot.' Here meals were prepared during the encampment by General Washington's domestics, which included free and enslaved servants. Housekeeper Elizabeth Thompson, a fine Irish woman in her seventies, managed the household. One of the enslaved servants, Hannah Till, worked here alongside her husband Isaac, the cook. Her wages were paid to her master, who put forty shillings a month aside until £53 was acquired to buy her freedom; which she earned by the end of the war.

The kitchen bustled with activity; baking, roasting, broiling, frying, and stewing were all accomplished here, both over the fire and atop piles of hot coals placed at several locations on the hearth. The most common cookware found in a colonial kitchen was made of iron. Wrought iron frying pans were used to cook items such as Washington's favorite hoe cakes, a cornmeal pancake that was popular for its ability to last on long journeys. Cast-iron pots received frequent use, usually weighing between 20-40 pounds empty; they could hold gallons of soups and stews for Washington's military family and guests. In back of the fireplace, there is a small opening cut into the wall. This is the bake oven, used to produce the majority of a household's baked goods. A fire burned inside the oven for hours, until the bricks reached the proper temperature. Ashes and coals were raked out, a wet mop was used to swab out any debris, and then the baking commenced: breads first, then cakes, cookies and pies, and lastly puddings.



VAFO 3361 Table

Made of walnut in the early 1700's, a tavern table made a perfect work surface in the kitchen. On the table are typical implements of colonial cooking, including redware dishes and platters, pewter porringers, and a rolling pin. Underneath the table is a one-half gallon wine cask, made of olive-green glass with a woven wicker covering. Wine was a common drink for middle- to upper-class families. Washington himself was fond of Madeira, a wine imported from Portugal.

The large cabinet along the wall is known as a hutch. Crafted in the mid-18th century, it was used to store dishes, eating and serving utensils, as well as provide a work space for cooking. Notice the notches in the counter space -- this hutch was also used as a cutting board.



VAFO 3353 Hutch

Washington's Bedroom



VAFO 30058 Dressing Table; VAFO 3583 Mirror; VAFO 30278 Pitcher and Basin

On the second story, the first room on the left was used by General and Mrs. Washington as their bedroom. Mrs. Washington would have kept personal hygiene and cosmetic items in a dressing table similar to this walnut one. An upper-class lady's morning "toilet" would have included use of expensive, imported items, such as the scented oil found in the green bottle on the table. A pitcher and basin were also important for everyday washing of one's face and hands, as well as cleaning one's teeth. In the daytime, Mrs. Washington used it as a sitting room. Here she entertained the Quaker ladies from Philadelphia who came to plead with the General for the release of their imprisoned husbands. Officer's wives were always present, making or repairing clothing and sometimes aiding in copying documents; no one was ever idle.



VAFO 3507 Table; VAFO 16 Commode Chair

Beds in the 18th century had no standard size, they were designed specifically for the user. The many pillows were used to prop up the sleeper at night into a sitting position, which was believed to be a healthier style of rest. This bedstead, made of mahogany and maple, was crafted in the 1770's.

During the winter, a commode chair such as this Chippendale example, circa 1775-1800, would have been a very welcome article of furniture in Headquarters. It served a special purpose during the night. Removal of the seat, allowed for use of the chamber pot. There was no need to go outdoors to use the privy.



VAFO 3359 Bedstead



VAFO 3355 Table

The tilt-top table crafted circa 1745 was used as a serving table for tea. The table's small size and ability to fold down, made it both lightweight and portable. Here General Washington would have rejoined Martha in the morning for breakfast, a rare opportunity for private time together.

Aides-de-Camp Bedroom



VAFO 3338 Chair; VAFO 3336 Chair; VAFO 3355 Tilt-top Table; VAFO 3507 Mirror; VAFO 3341 Chair

The second bedroom on the left is believed to have been the aides-de-camp bedroom. This room currently holds two beds, but many more would have been sharing this space. In the daytime, this room would have been used as another office, as exhibited by the papers and book on the small tilt-top table in the center of the room.



VAFO 82913 Trunk; VAFO 30256 Epaulets; VAFO 30258 Spurs

Officer's accoutrements, such as the ones displayed on the cowhide trunk denote his rank. The epaulets were straps made with gold metallic thread and attached to the regimental coat. These denoted the rank of lieutenant colonel. The use of spurs indicated that he was either a member of a cavalry unit or an officer. Washington was considered a superb horseman, his aides-de-camp would have to be good enough to keep up with him on the field of battle.

Officers had the privilege of having their own folding military field cots, which they purchased and transported at their own expense. An aide-de-camp could set this bed up quickly in the field or in a house. His belongings were kept in large traveling trunks and portmanteaus. Made of brown tooled leather, a portmanteau was used to transport small personal items and a few pieces of clothing. They were popular with travelers due to its size and the ease of transport on horseback.



VAFO 91279 Field Cot; VAFO 30250 Portmanteau

Small Bedroom



VAFO 91279 Camp Cot

The third and smallest room of the second story was often used as a guest bedroom. The dignitaries, congressmen, ambassadors, and socially prominent persons who visited General Washington were usually given this room. A folding field bed like this one was popular, and would have been appreciated by guests. The curtains kept away insects while used in the field during campaign season, and helped to keep the occupant warm, a welcome addition for a bed in a room with no fireplace. When not used by a guest, the room became available to anyone in the house.



VAFO 3519 Chest of Drawers; VAFO 82924
Pamphlet; VAFO 3365 Strongbox

Writing and reading materials lay on top of the walnut Chippendale chest of drawers. A pamphlet entitled "Military Exercises" rests on the far edge. Containing the 1764 British manual of arms, American officers would have studied this manual, to better understand the makeup and maneuvers of their enemy. Near the pamphlet sits a strongbox that would have been used to contain important documents or the currency to purchase drastically needed supplies.



VAFO 82914 Trunk; VAFO 61079 Officer's

Below the windowsill sits a traveling trunk. Such a trunk would have transported of personal effects than could fit in a portmanteau. On top of the trunk rests an officer's sash. Worn on top of the regimental coat, it was wrapped around the waist multiple times and tied off at the side. Sashes were an old European military custom that the United States adopted and continued to use through the end of the Civil War.

Garret



The garret was used as sleeping quarters for many of the house's inhabitants at various times during the encampment. The free and enslaved servant slept here, but records also show that at times aides-de-camp used this space. There is an account of aide-de-camp, John Laurens, knocking his head on the low ceiling when rising in the morning.



On top of a trestle-style table are a few common domestic objects. A cup, fashioned from a cow's horn, was an inexpensive drinking vessel in the colonial era. Next to the cup are two lighting devices. A dish-style candlestand was a simpler version of the fancy brass ones used by the upper class. A lantern provided a safer means of illuminating a room, the glass panes also protected the flame from accidentally being blown out. On the windowsill sits a black-glazed redware water pitcher. Redware was popular in the rural German communities of Pennsylvania's. It is a sturdy pottery, distinctive for its terracotta color.

VAFO 3313 Table; VAFO 30154 Horn Cup; VAFO 5743 Candlestand

Conclusion



In June 1778 the Army left Valley Forge, and followed the British Army into New Jersey, encountering them at Monmouth. There, the Americans demonstrated what they had learned at Valley Forge. After the war, the house changed ownership several times until 1878, when it was acquired by the Centennial and Memorial Association. In 1905 it became part of Valley Forge State Park and in 1976, part of Valley Forge NHP.