

Hard winter came early in December 1779 as both armies settled into winter quarters. While the bulk of the Continental Army was shivering in Morristown, New Jersey, over 3,000 troops of the Massachusetts Line garrisoned the Hudson Highlands, including the fortifications of West Point. The British and their German allies in New York City and the surrounding countryside suffered under “miserable” conditions as well.

Private Joseph Plumb Martin described the terrible ordeal of marching across New York to New Jersey. When his Light Infantry regiment crossed the Hudson River at King’s Ferry, a foot of snow had already fallen. He and his mates were “naked, fatigued and starved, forced to march many a weary mile in winter, through cold and snow to seek a situation in some . . . wood to build us habitations to starve and suffer in. . . we had to march all day through the snow and at night take up our lodgings in some wood, where after shoveling away the snow, we used to pitch three or four tents facing each other, and then join in making a fire in the center. Sometimes we could procure an armful of buckwheat straw, which we deemed a luxury.” By the end of December, his whole Connecticut Division had arrived at Jockey Hollow near Morristown where they set to work to build their winter huts in a “city for habitation.” They would do their best to survive in their twelve-foot by fifteen-foot huts through “the hard winter”—“the most bitter and prolonged” of the eighteenth century.

Brigadier General John Paterson’s Massachusetts Brigade (727 men) formed the core of the defense at West Point with the 7th, 10th, 11th, and 14th regiments supported by 219 artillerymen. His report of December 16th on the conditions there echoed those of Private Martin: “The State of the Garrison in my opinion is very precarious, if this Weather holds it is probable that communications from one side to the other [of the Hudson] may be cut off at least for some considerable Time.” On December 23rd, he wrote that an expected forty barrels of flour had failed to arrive and that he had built a bridge “across the Creek that surrounds Constitution Island that our supplies which must come by land may be brought directly to me.” Clearly the river was already frozen. As Christmas approached, he detailed further the causes of misery for the troops: “We have everything to struggle with, the severe Season put a stop to building Chimnies for the present, our Nails fall short which prevents our Carpenters from covering the Barracks so early as was expected, the Men being in Tents on the plain causes a great consumption of wood of which article we are entirely destitute.” The Hudson Highlands was going to be bleak for the men and women from Massachusetts.

The cold and snow did not spare the private soldiers in the Crown forces either. Hessian Captain Johann Ewald rejoiced when his regiments joined some 7-8,000 others destined to sail for Georgia as they boarded ships in the East River on December 16, 17, and 18. Last to board, his jägers “left their miserable winter quarters early on the morning of December 19 full of joy. These quarters consisted of half-finished huts and destroyed houses. Moreover, a very severe winter threatened us, with little wood available. Our comrades who had to remain behind wished us all blessings on our journey and would have gladly exchanged their lot for ours.” They would have changed their minds had they known what was in store for Ewald’s company. In the early morning of December 23rd, his ship, the *Pan*, foundered in the ice and finally settled on a

sand bar on the Long Island shore. Rescued, he would be put ashore in New York and would find himself on December 25th aboard the brigantine *Spring* without his own detachment and with his “provisions and equipment” lost. The fleet of 133 ships set sail at eight o’clock on December 26th and battled “a very severe storm” from the 27th until the 30th. He would see the Tybee Lighthouse at the mouth of the Savannah River in Georgia on February 1st. The campaign against Charleston, South Carolina, was underway.

As a part of your holiday travels, visit a colonial house near you that is decked out in its Christmas finery so that you can reflect on the sacrifices of those who endured the “hard winter” of 1779. For example, join the Washingtons for “Holly Day Tours of Washington's Headquarters” from December 13-17 and the Ellisons for Christmas at the Knox Headquarters State Historic Site on December 10th and 11th. (<http://nysparks.state.ny.us>). To learn more about the Revolution in the Hudson River Valley, log onto www.hudsonrivervalley.net and www.hudsonrivervalley.com. Huzza and happy holidays from the Hudson Highlands.