

## [Braisted on Herrera, 'Feeding Washington's Army: Surviving the Valley Forge Winter of 1778'](#)

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**Ricardo A. Herrera.** *Feeding Washington's Army: Surviving the Valley Forge Winter of 1778*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022. 272 pp. \$28.00 (cloth), [ISBN 978-1-4696-6731-7](#).



**Reviewed by** Todd W. Braisted (Independent Scholar) **Published on** H-Environment (December, 2022) **Commissioned by** Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

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### **Todd W. Braisted on Ricardo A. Herrera, *Feeding Washington's Army: Surviving the Valley Forge Winter of 1778***

December 1777. The British Army under Lt. Gen. Sir William Howe had settled into winter quarters after a campaign of several months saw his troops best Washington's army and capture the capital of the nascent nation. Despite the defeat of the British under Burgoyne at Saratoga by the forces led by Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates, the conflict was still very much in question. On December 19, 1777, Washington's troops, some twelve thousand of them, arrived at Valley Forge to commence hutting for their own winter cantonment. Popular history or lore propagates the image of a starving force, resigned to its fate, while its commander in chief can do nothing to ease its hardship. The truth is somewhat different.

In author Ricardo A. Herrera's new book, *Feeding Washington's Army*, Washington does not simply write endless, futile requests for aid from Congress but rather aggressively takes matters into the hands of the Continental Army and his top lieutenants. The British Army under Sir William Howe, while conducting similar operations, often at the same time, does little to hinder the Continental Army in its quest for supplies, and by extension, its survival. How did this happen?

Logistics for an established army in the eighteenth century could be a challenging task, given suppliers, transportation, storage, issuance, et cetera. Most European countries had long-standing bureaucracies to handle such matters—the Commissary General's Department for the British for instance. Upon the outbreak of hostilities in America in 1775, revolutionary fervor was better suited perhaps for the battlefield than the supply chain. Congress created commissary departments and administrators to handle supplies, but usually with limited authority. Property rights being one of the causes being fought for, the new government did not wish to infringe it unless faced with no alternative. Those administrators who did step forward were often of limited capabilities and few lasted for any considerable time. Relying on such men and systems was not only failing but was serious enough to endanger the cause they had embarked upon. Without an immediate, sustained supply of food, Washington would need to disperse the army, moving them further west and ceding control of the entire Philadelphia area to Howe and his forces. It was an option Washington wished to avoid at all costs.

Seizing the initiative, Washington tasked three of his officers to commence gathering provisions to the west, south, and southeast of Philadelphia. Acting closest to Valley Forge would be Major General Nathanael Greene, one of Washington's closest lieutenants since the 1776 New York campaign. Operating primarily in Chester County, Greene's force of around fourteen hundred men lay exposed to an aggressive foe in Philadelphia, a danger both unavoidable and in the end unrealized. Greene's force, as well as those operating farther south under Brigadier General Anthony Wayne and Captain Henry Lee, were tasked with collecting cattle and crops for the troops, as well as forage for their horses. These items were of course vital to the preservation of the Continental Army but also had the added benefit of denying their use by the British. The task was not easy for a variety of reasons. Farmers in the area were far from universal in their support of the revolution, with many openly or otherwise supporting the British. Even those who favored the new government were often hesitant to lose the fruits of their labor for certificates or near-worthless paper money in lieu of the gold offered by the British. Greene performed the task vigorously and efficiently, writing to Washington on February 15, 1778, that "like Pharaoh I harden my heart" in pursuit of his goals (p. 69).

Collecting forage and crops was but part of the task. It had to be transported from farms or collection points to Valley Forge. This required wagons, horses, and drivers. These needs were often fulfilled through local militia officers or civilian officials who well knew the area and could legally impress property when calls for voluntary service went unfilled.

The scope of the forage would extend to Delaware, where Brigadier General William Smallwood commanded the Maryland line in defense of Wilmington. The force under Wayne would proceed from there across to New Jersey, playing a cat-and-mouse game with two British forces under Lieutenant Colonel Abercromby and Stirling. Wayne would call upon the able assistance of New Jersey Militia Brigadier General Joseph Ellis, who provided crucial local support, and that of Brigadier General Count Casimir Pulaski at Trenton. Pulaski, the Polish nobleman who then commanded the Continental cavalry, would prove personally brave but his European mind-set ultimately proved of little tangible assistance.

The other force would be the smallest, commanded by the bold cavalry captain, Henry Lee, who would eventually command his own legion, ending the war as lieutenant colonel. Lee's force would likewise proceed to Delaware but also extend into Maryland, proving very adept in the collection of cattle.

The forage activities of both sides utilized the Delaware and the vessels at their command. Continental Navy Captain John Barry successfully passed Philadelphia in small craft and succeeded in burning an estimated four hundred tons of forage along the New Jersey coastline, the purpose being to deny it to the British. His efforts were notably curtailed by the able Royal Navy Captain Andrew Snape Hamond.

Herrera generally holds most of the Continental officers in high regard, particularly Greene, Wayne, Lee, and Barry. All of these officers would go on to distinguished careers for the remainder of the conflict. Indeed, the forage was no doubt excellent training for Greene in what would be his new role as quartermaster general, an office he happily left upon taking command of the southern army in 1780. William Smallwood and Casimir Pulaski are less favorably portrayed, although the former's flaws seem only to be characterized as unremarkable in his abilities. The Polish count, however, as

the author noted, “tried Washington’s temper” and “annoyed Wayne to no end” (p. 173)

The British officers are mostly portrayed as cautious or lacking initiative, particularly lieutenant colonels Robert Abercromby and Thomas Stirling for their performance in New Jersey countering Anthony Wayne and Pulaski. Captain Hamond and the Royal Navy, however, performed their tasks professionally, protecting the river and providing transportation for the British forays into New Jersey. The author credits the success of the American forage as much to Sir William Howe’s inactivity as to Nathanael Greene and his subordinates’ diligence. Herrera scathingly summed up Howe’s performance: “Howe had quit. His indifference, inaction, and lethargy were inexcusable. Whether Howe could have won a decisive victory is beside the point. Rather than act, Howe let slip his last chance, and instead sulked and wallowed in self-pity” (p. 178).

*Feeding Washington’s Army* is rich in primary sources from both sides. The author has a clear understanding of logistics and the militaries of the period. The narrative concentrates, understandably, on the activities of February 1778, but provides adequate background and fates of the principal participants. From a technical standpoint, the editing might have been a little stronger, with some sentences clearly disjointed and an overabundance of single, repetitive words in quotes. Both are minor, however, and in no way diminish the readability of the text. *Feeding Washington’s Army* provides a much-needed volume on the real events of one of the war’s iconic winters. Ricardo A. Herrera’s work will provide the template for future works studying the less glamorous but indisputably important roles of logistics in campaigns and how we view the struggles at Valley Forge in particular.

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