

# Logistics and the Continental Army: A Review in Four Parts

by Joe Wagner

Discussion and Review of:

[\*Supplying Washington's Army\*](#) by Erna Rich, published by the Center of Military History, United States Army, Washington, DC. in 1981.

**Logistics:** “. . . *the branch of military science dealing with the procurement, maintenance, and movement of equipment, supplies, and personnel.*”

The Continental Army winter camp at Valley Forge in 1777-78 is the stuff of legend. A pitiable, cold, starving army in rags perseveres through all hardship to emerge in the spring ready to fight and win. Skeptics will point out that it really wasn't all that tough a winter from a meteorological point of view; the succeeding winter at Morristown, NJ was far more intense. But for the men who were there, it was a time of real hardship. More than the cold, the lack of clothing, food, fuel, and every necessity of life were made worse by the knowledge that the British were only a few miles away in the warmth and comfort of their late capitol, Philadelphia. Why was there such a logistical failure at Valley Forge –what caused the inability of the Continentals to support themselves in the field for those cold winter months?

This first article begins a four-part series on logistics of the Continental Army drawn from the comprehensive US Army Military History Center publication that details the planning and execution necessary to support an American army in the field during the Revolution. It will provide some information for the reenactment and interpretation of that world of 235 years ago. It was easy enough to call up the militia, appoint the generals and colonels, establish tables for rations and clothing, and plan a campaign. But who brings the ammo and the flints? Where are the tents and kitchen gear? Who collects the food that is authorized for each man? Where are the wagons and carts to carry everything? Where do the horses and oxen come from to pull the wagons – and who feeds those? How does an army stay in one place for months and not suck dry the surrounding countryside? Or how does it move twenty miles, or two hundred, and expect to find everything it needs along the way and at the other end? And how did a collection of colonies with no experience or logistics structure instantaneously create the people and processes necessary to do all of these things and a million more?

The sections on Logistics to be provided here are:

Part I. The Quartermaster General

Part II. Transport and Forage

Part III. Subsistence and Clothing

Part IV. Ordinance

Each Part will be posted on the First Virginia blog in future weeks and months.