



Episode 7, 2012: Valley Forge Map

Ruth Taylor: I'm Ruth Taylor. I'm the Executive Director of the Newport Historical Society in Rhode Island. It has about 10,000 objects, documenting Newport history from 1640, literally, until today.

John Austin Stevens was actually a New Yorker who ended up dying in Newport. His papers were donated to us by his daughter in the 1940's. All kinds of bits and pieces. And then we noticed this obviously older paper. When we unfolded it, the hair stood up on the back of my neck. I could see the Schuylkill River labeled, and it became clear that it was a map of Washington's encampment at Valley Forge. My very first thought was, "Do people know about this? Is this what it appears to be?"

Wes Cowan: Well, let's – let's take a look at what you've got here. I'm – I'm pretty excited about this. Schuylkill River.

Ruth: Here, take a look over here.

Wes: Valley Forge River... Wow.

Ruth: And there's the actual forge, right there.

Wes: You're telling me that this is the plan of the camp at Valley Forge.

Ruth: Well, it appears to be.

Wes: What do you know about where it came from?

Ruth: It was found with the John Austin Stevens papers. He was a descendent of a Continental Army officer. He became fascinated with the American Revolution.

Wes: How long have you had it?

Ruth: Well, we've had it since the 1940's, but apparently we've only known about it since I found it last summer.

Wes: You just found this last summer?

Ruth: Yeah.

Wes: Wow. And the paper, to me, looks like the right kind of paper.

Ruth: Mmhmm.

Wes: I thought there was something on the back here. Yeah. It's docketed, too. "Plan of a battle in the Revolutionary War in which the situation of the armies is shown."

Valley Forge is one of those, sort of, signal events in American history that we all think about as a big turning point in the war.

Ruth: We forget that our victory wasn't inevitable. And the – the work that happened at Valley Forge was really important.

Wes: Yeah.

Contemporaneous maps of the Valley Forge encampment are extremely rare. Only five are known to exist in the U.S.

Sometimes I get chills in doing these investigations. This is sort of one of those...

Ruth: We're hoping that you can authenticate it. Was this map actually drawn in 1777, when Washington's encampment was at Valley Forge? Did Washington hold it and look at it?

Wes: Alright let's take a look at this map. When you hold this up to the light, you can see the lines where this was made on a screen. This kind of paper is called laid paper. Laid paper is handmade paper. You can see these folds. That's because this was meant to be folded and stored in some sort of a tall container. Often people would write on the back of sheets of paper like this. This is called docketing.

But this is odd...

It says "Plan of a Battle." That's pretty curious because Valley Forge was not a battle.

In fact, while just over 20 miles from the British in Philadelphia, a battle shot was never fired at Valley Forge. Instead, it was a place for the young Continental Army to lick their wounds after bitter losses at Brandywine and Germantown.

They were basically a ragtag bunch, poorly trained. And it was Washington and his generals' decision that here was a place where we are going to whip the Continental Army into shape. And over the course of the winter that's exactly what happened. Was it actually drawn at the time that Valley Forge was used as the headquarters of the Continental Army?

I want to say yes, but there are just enough things here that sort of puzzle me. I recognize some of the names here and they're misspelled. "McDougal" for example, McDougall didn't spell his name the way it's done here. "Decalb", that's not the way DeKalb's name was spelled.

And it looks very different from other maps I've seen of Valley Forge that were made at the time.

Here's a really interesting map by Louis Duportail, and Duportail was Washington's chief engineer. You know, it's much more detailed in terms of the topography. It shows hills, valleys, and trenches - essential information for an army.

Ruth's map shows little topography besides the river. And there are structures on this map – like Fort Platt - that don't appear on these other maps. I'm going to ask our office to check with our handwriting expert, John Resnikoff, to see if the writing on the map or the docket matches Washington's or any other known officers' at Valley Forge. But I think my first step is just to see if the details on this map match up with the Valley Forge encampment in 1777.

So, I'm on my way to Valley Forge. I'm going to meet with a guy named Phil Chase. He's an old friend of mine, but more importantly, for 30 years this guy was the editor of "The George Washington Papers." If there's anybody that can tell me about the map, it's Phil.

Phil Chase: Ok, wow. Yeah. Here's Washington's headquarters in the right spot and that's where we are right now.

Wes: Phil says Washington's headquarters is not the only thing accurate on the map.

Phil: These were the brigades and the divisions that were here at the very beginning and pretty well stayed here through most of the camp.

He points to the note "General Sullivan; General Smallwood Division at Wilmington" – he says that's correct – while Sullivan was at Valley Forge, his division, under the command of brigadier General William Smallwood, was stationed in Delaware that winter. And Phil notices something else, it doesn't look like the map is finished.

Phil: Although this is made with a lot of skill, it doesn't look like a finished polished product that was made for the official records or later made as a historical record of the encampment.

Wes: I point out some of the other discrepancies that I find troubling, buildings I've never seen at Valley Forge, like Fort Platt. Phil thinks we need to see the encampment to understand.

This map came from the descendants of Ebenezer Stephens. Now, was he here?

Phil: No, he wasn't here. He was at the Boston Tea Party. He was at the Victory at Saratoga. He was at the Victory at Yorktown. He was everywhere but he wasn't at Valley Forge.

Wes: How did his family end up with it then?

Phil: Stephens had friends and contacts in the army. He may, somebody may have passed it on to him at that time.

Wes: As we walk around the 5 square miles with a copy of Ruth's map, Phil explains what a difficult winter 1777 was.

Phil: They got here the 19th of December, which was very late for establishing a winter camp. And many of the troops had inadequate clothing. There weren't, initially, adequate, enough tools for them to work with. And they had to live in tents until they could build their own log structures.

Wes: Poor sanitary conditions brought diseases like typhoid and dysentery—killing over 2,000 soldiers.

Phil: This would've been the main parade ground and sort of the center of the entire camp.

Wes: And this was the place that the troops would have been drilling and, and learning military maneuvers in?

Phil: Yeah.

Wes: Phil explains that despite the hardship, the men were fervently dedicated to their cause.

The young army worked daily to improve their skills under the instruction of a Prussian commander named Frederic Von Steuben – a master at military drilling.

Von Steuben, along with the Baron DeKalb and Louis Duportail, were just a few of the foreign officers in Washington's command.

Their superior skills were a boon to the Continental Army and the revolution offered Europeans an opportunity for military advancement... and money.

So, I mean, in some ways then, this was a real crucible for our army to, you know, learn how to maneuver more on the field, right?

Phil: Yes, they were more confident and they were better trained when they left.

Wes: Phil walks me over to the spot where one of Valley Forge's best known redoubts – or defenses -used to be, known as the Star Fort.

Phil: This was the first redoubt that was built, called Fort Platt on this. Apparently, that was probably an early name. General McDougal's aide de camp, Richard Platt, was here about three and a half months in the early part of the encampment.

Wes: So the fact that it's called Fort Platt, does that signify potentially that this map may be fairly early in the history of Valley Forge?

Phil: Yeah, it does give a strong indication.

Wes: I am almost convinced this map is from the winter of 1777 / 78, but there's something that's been bothering me from the start - the misspelled names.

Why didn't the person who drew this map know how to spell the names of these important generals?

Phil reminds me of the unfinished look of the map. He thinks that's because it was a working map made by an engineer, tasked to build defenses.

Phil: Clearly with the emphasis on the redoubt here and the lines here and the descriptions of the frontline, their main focus was on finding a way to defend the encampment. And that was an ongoing problem with the camp.

Wes: But why in the world would a skilled engineer not know how to spell?

Phil tells me that Washington's chief engineer was Louis Duportail – a Frenchman.

Phil: The French were the best military engineers in the world at this time. And if you were a Frenchman who had just arrived in this country and didn't know the language very well, you might mishear things and spell it just the way that it sounded to you.

Wes: So, did Duportail make this map? Time to check in with the office.

Kevin McAuley: Hi, Wes. I just finished Skyping with John Resnikoff and I learned something very interesting...

Wes: Ruth, I knew this was going to be a great story the minute you showed me this map.

I tell Ruth that when I compare her map to the known layout of Valley Forge in 1777, it largely matches except for some name changes.

Which means that this was probably a planning document that was used at Valley Forge.

Ruth: That's amazing. That's so exciting.

Wes: Phil Chase, our Washington expert, he looked at this map and said, "Man this has the fingerprints of a French engineer."

The head of those engineers was a guy named Louis Deportail. And you may know that name.

Ruth: Yes.

Kevin: Hi John, Can you tell us what you found out?

John Resnikoff: I studied this map very carefully and I also studied the examples you provided me, while I'm sure the front is not in the hand of Duportail, I found eight matching points between Duportail and the docket. They include things like the way the "i" is dotted, the final loop of the "n", the way the word "which" looks, and I could go on and on and I'm certain I could probably find more. It's my opinion the docket was written by Duportail.

Wes: Louis Duportail docketed this manuscript.

Ruth: Wow. I never would have thought to look at this handwriting.

Wes: But there's still one mystery: both Phil and I don't know why the docket says "Plan of Revolutionary Battle." One theory is that "plan of battle" could be a French version of "line" or "order of battle", which refers to the positioning of troops on the ground in preparation for an attack.

There's a lot more research that can be done about this map. I was just able to sort of scratch the surface. I think that this map is worth a considerable amount of money, certainly in the six figures.

Ruth: I am thrilled with what you all have done and this is an amazing result.