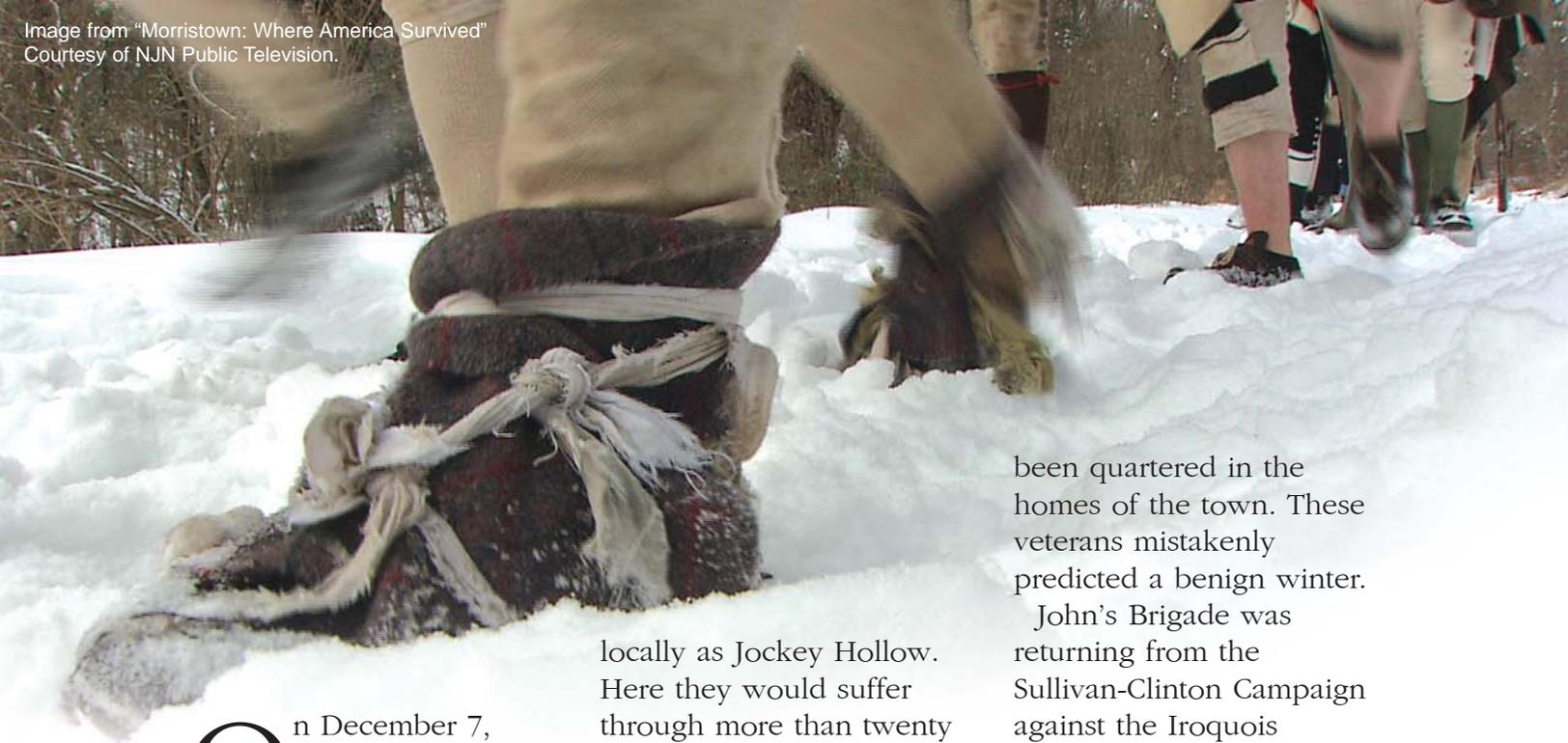


**The True Story  
of a Soldier  
at Jockey Hollow,  
Morristown, in the  
1779 - 1780**

# **HARD WINTER**

**By Robert A. Mayers**  
Author of "The War Man"



On December 7, 1779, a column of soldiers stumbled through a blinding snowstorm as they passed through Morristown, New Jersey, a village with a few houses formed around a town green where cattle grazed in the warmer seasons. Corporal John Allison with the 2nd Company, 5th New York Regiment, was reported on the muster roll that week as "sick in camp." He struggled to keep up with his comrades. The way that led out of the town was a narrow back road, slick from rain and ice storms that had left two feet of hard crusted snow on the ground. After a few miles the weary soldiers came into a bleak, windswept 2,000-acre forest in a mountainous valley. They had reached their final destination for the year. It was known

locally as Jockey Hollow. Here they would suffer through more than twenty snowstorms. This was the longest and most severe winter of the revolution and the entire eighteenth century.

During early December, 12,000 officers and men of the Continental Army streamed into the camp along back roads from north of New York City. Most of these men, like John Allison, were seasoned veterans. They had fought in the invasion of Canada in 1775 and at the battles of Long Island, White Plains, Trenton, Princeton, Saratoga and Monmouth. Two years earlier many had wintered at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania two years earlier. Some of the men had spent the winter of 1776—1777 in Morristown and were now returning. At that time, the Army was smaller, the weather was less harsh and a few had

been quartered in the homes of the town. These veterans mistakenly predicted a benign winter.

John's Brigade was returning from the Sullivan-Clinton Campaign against the Iroquois Nations. It was a perilous six-month, 600-mile expedition deep into the rugged country of western New York State. Earlier in the year, Washington reluctantly sent out about a third of his sorely needed troops to stop the brutal attacks and atrocities by Indians and their Loyalist allies on settlements on the frontier. During these months the Continental troops had endured hunger, clashes with hostile Native Americans and exhausting forced marches over mountains and through swamps. Of the twenty-seven men in John Allison's Company who had started out in the spring, only fourteen remained fit for duty when they arrived at Jockey Hollow. Some were killed in the fighting. Others died from illness, and a few



deserted. Seven men had been left behind in hospitals along the way. All of this suffering in Indian country would soon seem trivial when compared with the challenges of the winter ahead.

George Washington selected this desolate Morris County location because it had obvious logistical, topographical and geographic military advantages. It was protected on the east by three ridges of the Watchung Mountains and the impassible Great Swamp. The possibility of observing advancing troops of the main British Army, thirty miles away in New York City, from the first ridge of the Watchung Mountains was a great advantage. This made it easy to defend passes through the Watchungs at Westfield, Scotch Plains, Watchung and Bound

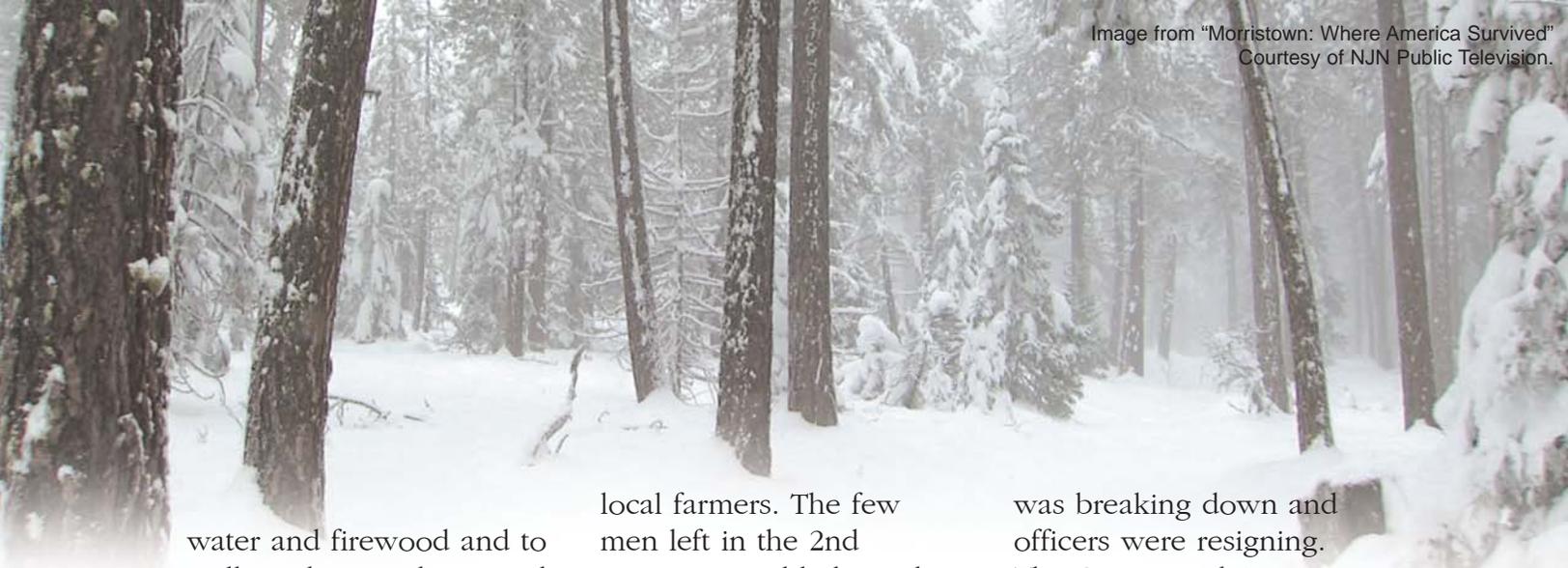
Brook. Jockey Hollow occupied most of the farm of Henry Wick, a prosperous farmer. Timber for the building of huts could be found in this center of rich farmland. However, the severity of the winter and the ability to sustain the Army with clothing, supplies and food were tragically underestimated. Every day the troops needed 10,000 pounds of bread and beef to survive.

Still exhausted from the rigors of the past six months in combat on the frontier, it was a bad time for John to be sick. Until log huts could be built, there was no shelter for the survivors of the 2nd Company in the wilderness. Tents pitched after scraping through the snow that soon became knee-deep provided the only protection. Both tents and blankets were in short supply. Many of the cold,

hungry and barefoot men had little choice but to lie down on an armful of straw and huddle together for warmth. Most were clad only in threadbare remnants of uniforms.

The New York Brigade was assigned to the northern end of the camp. The site lies along the east side of Jockey Hollow Road where it intersects with Grand Parade Road. It is about a mile and a half north of the house of Henry Wick's house. This was the main road through the camp. It led north to Morristown.

The campsite is on a sloping well-drained hillside area about one hundred yards long and three hundred yards deep. The huts stood near a footpath that leads about fifty yards down the hillside to a rushing stream. John Allison probably used this path hundreds of times to carry



water and firewood and to walk to the parade ground and stand sentry duty. Except for trees, this place today looks exactly as it did during that winter. A descriptive sign at the New York encampment reads:

*Brig. Gen. James Clinton with the New York brigade of the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Regiments, a total of 1,267 men, spent the winter of 1779—1780 in huts here on this hillside. They were encamped here from December 12, 1779 to May 12, 1780. The official uniform of these troops was blue, faced with buff with white buttons and linings.*

By December 15, John Allison and his comrades began cutting down oak, walnut and chestnut trees from the Wick land to finish and move into huts. When this supply of timber ran out, they began by pulling down fences and outhouses for boards. This caused a furor among

local farmers. The few men left in the 2nd company could almost be accommodated in one hut. They completed building huts by the end of the month. John could see these crude dwellings stretching south for a mile from the New York camp, toward the town of Basking Ridge.

### **GEORGE WASHINGTON ARRIVES**

General Washington arrived in Morristown on December 1, 1779, one week after the New Yorkers, and moved his staff into the Ford Mansion in Morristown. Washington soon faced these urgent problems. Enlistments were expiring, men were beginning to desert, food supplies were not reaching camp through the impassible roads, discipline

was breaking down and officers were resigning. The Continental Army was beginning to disintegrate.

All of the New York senior officers left camp to go home for several weeks. Some did not return until spring. The reason offered for their absence was that they were returning to their home state to recruit replacements for their decimated units. Corporals, sergeants and low-level officers were responsible for most of the hard winter. Only

Lieutenant Henry Vanderburgh and Corporal Allison remained in charge of the 2nd Company.

New York Brigade orderly books, the daily record of orders and details of camp life, show that strict discipline was observed at Jockey Hollow despite harsh conditions.



**General George Washington**  
Rembrandt Peale, Oil on Canvas,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art



**Gen. Baron von Steuben**

Charles Wilson Peale,  
1782

Guard duties were assigned each day and parades, musters, inspections, drills and punishments were regularly held on the Grand Parade ground. General Washington and members of the Continental Congress visited the camp parades, and inspections were held. This involved the entire army.

One day as John Allison and his comrades stood at attention, shivering on the parade ground, General Baron von Steuben personally inspected each of the eight state brigades wintering at the camp. After reviewing the New York Regiments, the Baron reported,

*“The most shocking picture of misery I have ever seen, scarce a man*

*having wherewithal to cover his nakedness in this severe season and a great number very bad with the itch.”*

Quartermaster General Nathanael Greene reported,

*“Poor fellows, they exhibit a picture truly distressing—more than half naked and two thirds starved.”*

Washington himself criticized General James Clinton by saying that his New York troops were *“in bad an order as possible.”* While he excused their tattered clothing, he deplored their rusty and broken muskets.

A severe snowstorm hit the camp on December 28, 1779, and the weather continued to worsen in the

new year. Howling winds tore apart many of the tents. Five more snows fell in January. Drifts had reached over twelve feet high and caused the roads to disappear in many places.

In January 1780, a month after arriving at Morristown, the 2nd Company had dwindled down to a handful. There were barely enough men to fill a single hut. Two men were sick and were being cared for at hospitals in Newburgh and

Haverstraw, New

York. Seven men were on duty on the front lines, guarding the passes to the east of Morristown. Some men guarded posts in the Watchung Mountains, and others worked building a

fortification overlooking Morristown. This earthwork, built by the previous encampment in the spring of 1777, took on the name of Fort Nonsense since it was



**Gen. Nathanael Greene**

Charles Wilson Peale,  
1783

believed that the project was maintained for the sole purpose of keeping the soldiers busy.

Thousands of soldiers at Jockey Hollow had now been in service for three years. Many enlisted in early 1777, about the same time as John Allison. When they signed up, the term of enlistment was “for three years or the duration of the war.” Since three years had passed, they assumed their obligation was over and expected to leave this frozen misery. However, the Continental Congress interpreted the terms as requiring the men to remain for the “duration of the war.” This issue had never been clarified during the excitement and patriotic fervor three years before. Now, the only way to go home was to desert and risk a death penalty.

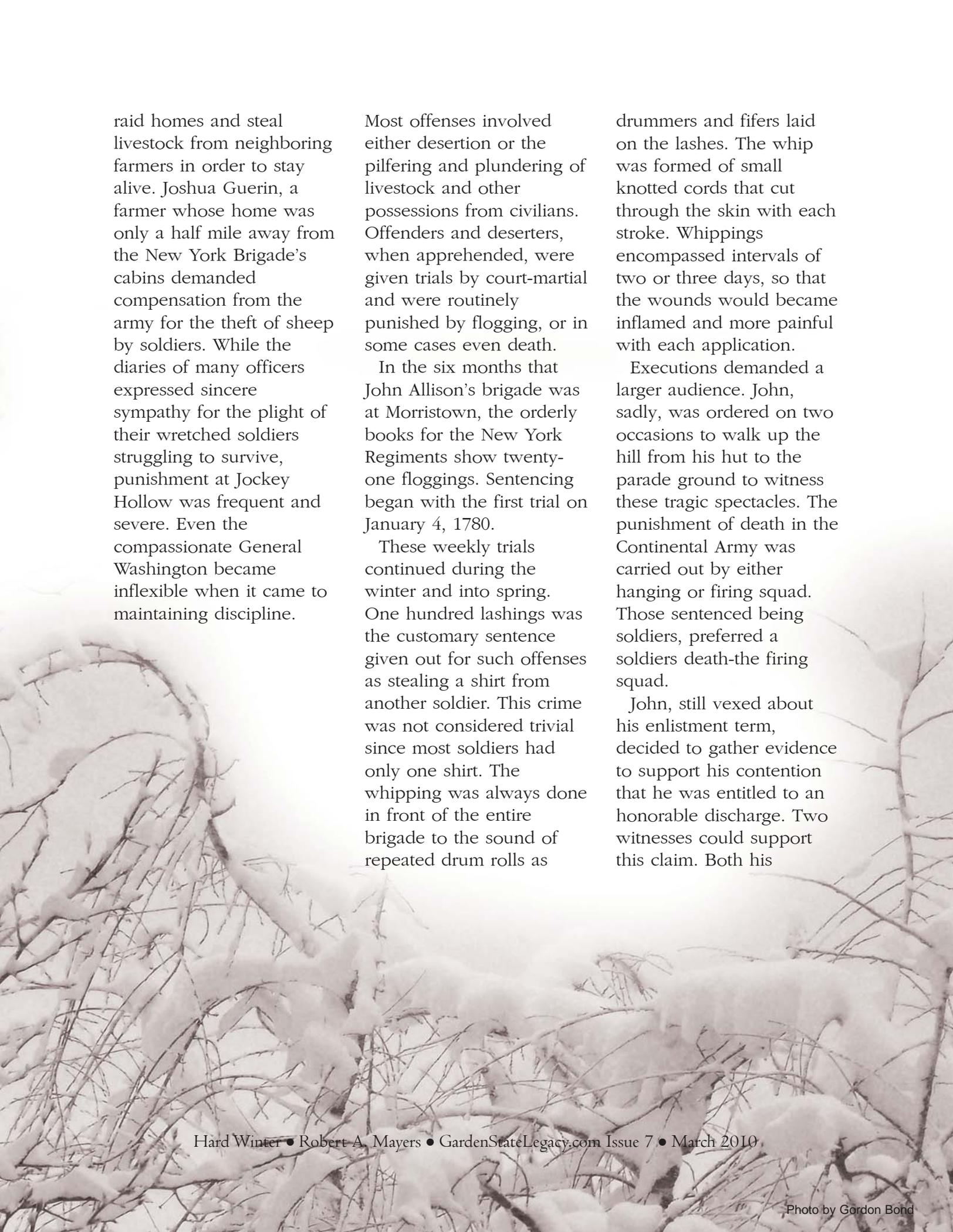
Troops were deserting at Jockey Hollow at an alarming rate, and mutinies of entire state brigades were festering.

Like most men in the Continental Army that year, John Allison was shocked and disappointed by the news. In February, he expected to return with his discharge in hand to his home forty miles away in Haverstraw, New York. He had not seen his wife, Sarah, and their infant children, Elizabeth and Anthony, for eight months and dreamed of basking in the warmth of the fireside with his young family. He could easily have deserted, like so many others, by just disappearing into the woods and beating his way home through the bitter weather over the narrow, snow-blocked roads of the New Jersey hills. He protested to the few officers of the New York Brigade who remained at the camp that he could prove that he had only enlisted for three years. His pleas were ignored. Thousands of others shared John’s plight caused by the vague enlistment terms. It was a major issue for the new

nation in its effort to maintain a standing army in the remaining years of the war.

The lines of huts on the hillside of the New York encampment offered little protection as the cruel winter went on. Bitter winds pierced the wooden walls and froze hands and feet. During those weeks, many regiments were reporting that only fifty men were ready for duty out of about four hundred men. Many men were too cold to desert. Without warm clothing and far from home, they could never survive the trip home. Soldiers were starving and freezing to death at the same time.

Despite severe punishment, typically a hundred lashes, the suffering troops began to



raid homes and steal livestock from neighboring farmers in order to stay alive. Joshua Guerin, a farmer whose home was only a half mile away from the New York Brigade's cabins demanded compensation from the army for the theft of sheep by soldiers. While the diaries of many officers expressed sincere sympathy for the plight of their wretched soldiers struggling to survive, punishment at Jockey Hollow was frequent and severe. Even the compassionate General Washington became inflexible when it came to maintaining discipline.

Most offenses involved either desertion or the pilfering and plundering of livestock and other possessions from civilians. Offenders and deserters, when apprehended, were given trials by court-martial and were routinely punished by flogging, or in some cases even death.

In the six months that John Allison's brigade was at Morristown, the orderly books for the New York Regiments show twenty-one floggings. Sentencing began with the first trial on January 4, 1780.

These weekly trials continued during the winter and into spring. One hundred lashings was the customary sentence given out for such offenses as stealing a shirt from another soldier. This crime was not considered trivial since most soldiers had only one shirt. The whipping was always done in front of the entire brigade to the sound of repeated drum rolls as

drummers and fifers laid on the lashes. The whip was formed of small knotted cords that cut through the skin with each stroke. Whippings encompassed intervals of two or three days, so that the wounds would become inflamed and more painful with each application.

Executions demanded a larger audience. John, sadly, was ordered on two occasions to walk up the hill from his hut to the parade ground to witness these tragic spectacles. The punishment of death in the Continental Army was carried out by either hanging or firing squad. Those sentenced being soldiers, preferred a soldier's death-the firing squad.

John, still vexed about his enlistment term, decided to gather evidence to support his contention that he was entitled to an honorable discharge. Two witnesses could support this claim. Both his

younger brother, Thomas was present at the time he enlisted, and his brother-in-law, Captain Amos Hutchings, who had recruited him, was there. They could certainly attest to what had happened at Coe's Tavern in Clarkstown, New York, when he had signed up three years before.

While the bitter cold had caused much suffering, the worst problem was that the depleted Continental Army was starving to death. Supply roads were snowbound until mid-March, and farmers refused to sell the little food available for depreciated Continental currency. The entire camp was going without food for four or five days at a time. Corn used to feed horses was eagerly consumed. Pet dogs disappeared from the camp. Some men began eating bark and boiling shoe leather.

In March, John gave the deposition letters from his brother and Captain Hutchings to Lieutenant Henry Vanderburgh to pass up the chain of command. He waited anxiously for the next six weeks. He may have believed that the delay was caused by the absence of most New York senior officers. Colonel Dubois Commander of the

5th New York Regiment had resigned, and General Clinton had left for home in December and had not yet returned. This frustrating wait made John's hopes for going home begin to fade.

By April, most of the New York officers returned from leave, but John's request for discharge still was not answered. In desperation, this common soldier did something extraordinary. He bravely appealed directly to the Commander in Chief, George Washington. His letter has incredibly survived over two hundred and thirty years and was recently discovered in the archives of the New York Public Library.

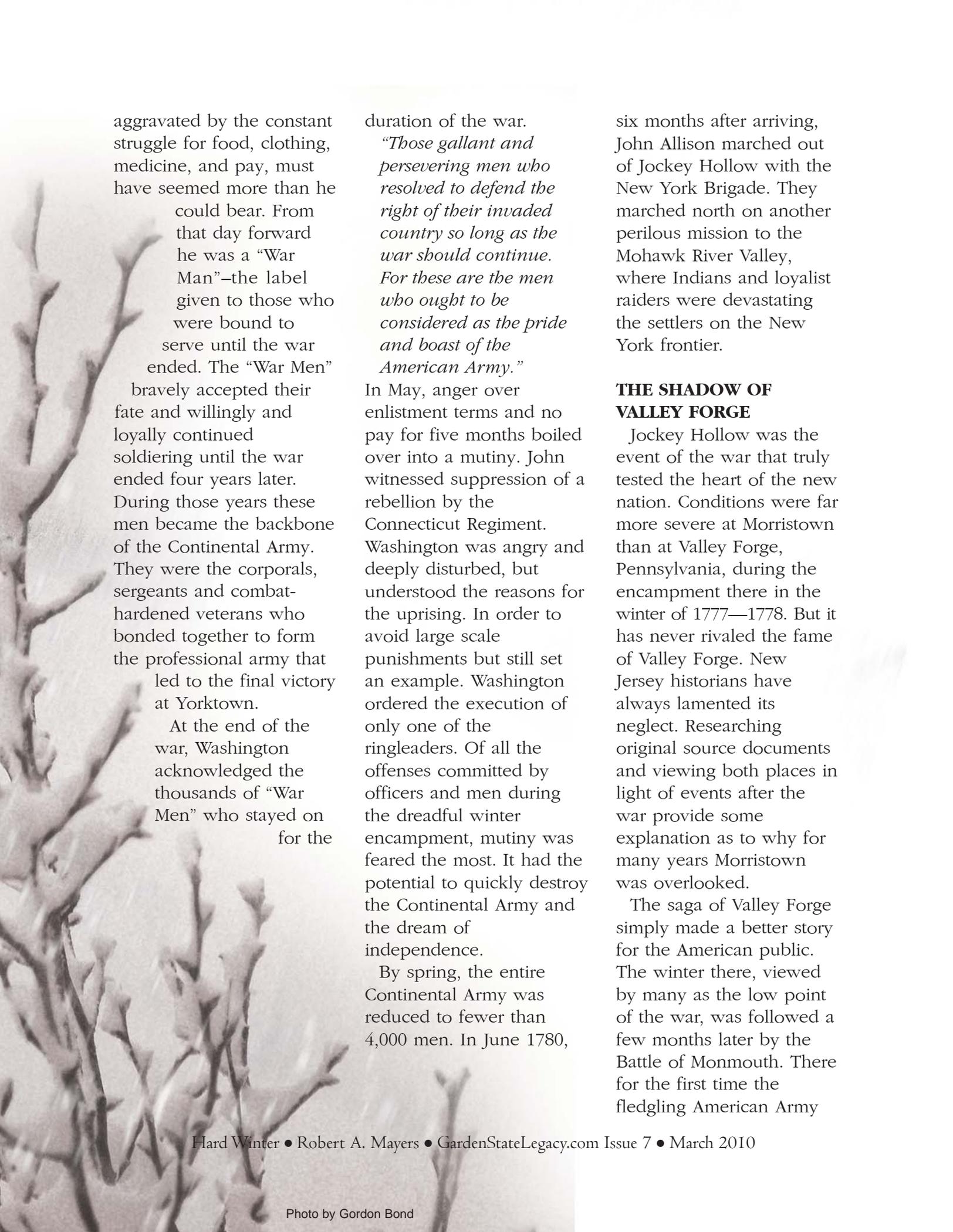
*Camp near Morristown  
April 16th 1780*

*To His Excellency  
Genl Washington  
Commander and Chief  
of the United States of  
North America The  
Humble Petition of John  
Allison Soldier in the  
fifth New York Regiment  
in the late Captain  
Hutchings Company  
Most Humbly Herewith*

*Whereas your  
Excellencies Petitioner  
having only Inlisted for  
the term of three years  
and that time having  
expired the first day of  
January last part and*

*Whereas I made  
application to the  
commanding officer of  
the Regt for my  
discharge, but Could  
not obtain it, though I  
produced evidence  
Sworn in Writing that I  
was only enlisted for  
three years and no  
longer which Deposition  
I Inclose that your  
Excellency may see the  
fairness and Clemency  
of my Inlistment—  
Now Please your  
Excellency I implore  
that you would deeme  
justice done in this  
affair and your  
Petitioner in Duty  
Bound shall Pray—  
N.B. As the  
Commanding officer of  
the Regt would give no  
attention to the  
affidavids produced  
and sworn without the  
evidence personally  
appeared- I produced  
them personally and yet  
would not-? Accept of  
them\_\_\_\_\_*

There is no evidence of a reply to this plea. After five years of combat, this was the last time that John Allison attempted to leave the army. Like most soldiers at that time, he believed that desertion was a disgrace and continued to serve. At first, despair, disillusionment, monotony and longing for home,



aggravated by the constant struggle for food, clothing, medicine, and pay, must have seemed more than he

could bear. From that day forward he was a “War Man”—the label given to those who were bound to serve until the war ended. The “War Men” bravely accepted their fate and willingly and loyally continued soldiering until the war ended four years later. During those years these men became the backbone of the Continental Army. They were the corporals, sergeants and combat-hardened veterans who bonded together to form the professional army that led to the final victory at Yorktown.

At the end of the war, Washington acknowledged the thousands of “War Men” who stayed on for the

duration of the war.

*“Those gallant and persevering men who resolved to defend the right of their invaded country so long as the war should continue. For these are the men who ought to be considered as the pride and boast of the American Army.”*

In May, anger over enlistment terms and no pay for five months boiled over into a mutiny. John witnessed suppression of a rebellion by the Connecticut Regiment. Washington was angry and deeply disturbed, but understood the reasons for the uprising. In order to avoid large scale punishments but still set an example. Washington ordered the execution of only one of the ringleaders. Of all the offenses committed by officers and men during the dreadful winter encampment, mutiny was feared the most. It had the potential to quickly destroy the Continental Army and the dream of independence.

By spring, the entire Continental Army was reduced to fewer than 4,000 men. In June 1780,

six months after arriving, John Allison marched out of Jockey Hollow with the New York Brigade. They marched north on another perilous mission to the Mohawk River Valley, where Indians and loyalist raiders were devastating the settlers on the New York frontier.

### **THE SHADOW OF VALLEY FORGE**

Jockey Hollow was the event of the war that truly tested the heart of the new nation. Conditions were far more severe at Morristown than at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, during the encampment there in the winter of 1777—1778. But it has never rivaled the fame of Valley Forge. New Jersey historians have always lamented its neglect. Researching original source documents and viewing both places in light of events after the war provide some explanation as to why for many years Morristown was overlooked.

The saga of Valley Forge simply made a better story for the American public. The winter there, viewed by many as the low point of the war, was followed a few months later by the Battle of Monmouth. There for the first time the fledgling American Army

stood up to seasoned British regulars of the best trained and equipped army in the world. This turning point in the war is popularly believed to have been achieved largely by the training of raw soldiers by Baron von Steuben at Valley Forge. This had great public relations value in an area only twenty miles from Philadelphia, the nation's capitol for several years after the war. Valley Forge soon became a major tourist attraction. Tucked away in the back hills of New Jersey, Jockey Hollow languished for years without acclaim. It did not become a National Park until 1933.

Many of bad things happened in Morristown that the public and the army wanted to forget in the years that followed the war. Three major mutinies by entire state brigades occurred here and in nearby Pompton. This sullied the image of quietly suffering soldiers. The place reminded people

that beleaguered troops at Jockey Hollow received meager support from civilians who often choose to sell food and supplies to the enemy rather than accept devalued Continental dollars. The avoidable breakdown of the supply chain in a bountiful country was shameful. Corporal punishment of common soldiers at the dreary camp was excessive when compared to other periods of the war. Even the local population smarted for years over the memories of the encampments. The Army brought smallpox, stole livestock. The freezing soldiers searching destroyed structures searching for firewood.

Finally, confusion persisted, caused by the fact that there were two major encampments at Morristown during the

Revolutionary War.

Actions that occurred during these times have become commingled. Valley Forge fits neatly into a single winter, and other military and political events can easily be related to that period.

Jockey Hollow, purposely devoid of any large heroic monuments, is best visited in mid winter. On a cold snowbound day, the site appears much as it did to ragged and hungry John Allison and his comrades of the 2nd Company as they stood on guard in the icy wind.



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