

Martha's Role in the War



Martha and George Washington spent a significant amount of time together during the American Revolution. In some years of the war, they were together more often than they were apart. Overall, historians estimate that Martha and George Washington spent between 52 and 54 of the war's roughly 103 months either together or living near one another. When Martha joined her husband, she became a regular presence in camp life and at social gatherings, often boosting morale among officers and soldiers. After the war, George Washington calculated that Martha's travel expenses to visit him between December 1775 and July 1782 totaled more than 1,064 pounds. During these journeys, she frequently stayed with families such as Henry Laurens, John Mitchell, and Joseph Reed.

Each year during the long winter months—when military campaigns slowed or stopped—Martha joined George at his winter encampments, including Valley Forge and Morristown. She often remained there for several months at a time. Although accommodations were limited, the camps typically included small private quarters for the Washingtons and a space where Martha dined with George, his secretaries, and other high-ranking officers. When possible, she also traveled to see him at other locations during the year, including Philadelphia when Washington was called to meet with Congress.

Traveling to join her husband presented many challenges. Martha Washington had to endure the physical difficulties of long-distance travel and long periods away from family members, including her son, John Parke Custis, and her grandchildren. She also faced concerns about her safety. In the summer and fall

of 1775, many feared that the British might attempt to capture the wife of the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. Such concerns persisted throughout the war, and Martha was often accompanied by an assigned guard. During her travels, she typically stayed with trusted friends and political allies.

The Revolution greatly expanded Martha Washington's social circle. While visiting cities such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, she met many influential figures. At the same time, much of her time in camp was spent with ordinary soldiers and with women who followed the army, often known as camp followers. Martha developed a strong concern for the hardships faced by common soldiers, which led her to become more actively involved in efforts to improve their conditions.

In June 1780, after a particularly difficult winter for the Continental Army, Martha Washington joined several other prominent women in organizing a campaign to support American soldiers. The effort was led by Esther DeBerdt Reed, the wife of Joseph Reed, a former military secretary to George Washington. Together with Sarah Franklin Bache, the daughter of Benjamin Franklin, Reed helped found the Ladies Association of Philadelphia.

The campaign quickly spread. Women in counties across the states formed local committees, chose representatives to serve as treasurers, and collected donations while recording each contribution. Once gathered, the funds were sent to the first lady of each state, who then forwarded them to Martha Washington. The money was distributed to soldiers at General Washington's discretion. Records from a Mount Vernon account book indicate that Martha herself donated \$20,000—equivalent to about 6,000 pounds—to the campaign in October 1780. Ultimately, the "Offering of the Ladies" was used mainly to provide clothing for soldiers.

Beyond these material contributions, Martha Washington's presence and example inspired many people during the Revolutionary era. She helped George Washington host soldiers, politicians, and their families, strengthening important relationships. Her role at the encampments was even commemorated in popular music. One song, known as "Lady Washington's Reel" or "Lady Washington's Quick Step," was written in 1777, and another, "Saw You My Hero, George," also called "Lady Washington," was composed two years later. These songs celebrated her support for the army and her visible presence alongside the soldiers during the war.