

A Visit to Two National Parks: Mount Rainier and Valley Forge



Mount Rainier stands in the foreground, framed in the background by Mount Adams, far left, Mount Hood, second left, and Mount St. Helens, right, in this aerial view

I'm Shirley Griffith.

And I'm Christopher Cruise with EXPLORATIONS in VOA Special English. Today we tell about two areas that are popular with visitors to the United States. One is a place of fierce beauty. It is Mount Rainier National Park in the northwestern state of Washington. The other is one of the most important places in the history of the American Revolution. It is Valley Forge National Historical Park in the eastern state of Pennsylvania.

The American Indians who lived in the northwest called the great mountain "Takhoma." One tribe said it was a female monster that would eat people. Other old stories among the Indians said the mountain could produce huge amounts of fire.

In 1792, British explorer George Vancouver became the first European to see the huge mountain. He named it after a navy friend, Captain Peter Rainier.

Today the people who live in the northwestern city of Seattle call it “The Mountain.” Mount Rainier is almost 100 kilometers from Seattle. Yet it can be seen from almost any place in the city. The beautiful, snow covered mountain seems to offer the city its protection.

The mountain’s offer of protection is false. Mount Rainier is not just a mountain. It is a sleeping volcano. Steam and heat often rise from the very top of the huge mountain, causing snow to melt. Mount Rainier is 4,392 meters tall. Its top is covered in snow all year. More than 25 thick glaciers cover a lot of the mountain. In some areas, these rivers of ice are more than one hundred meters thick.

Mount Rainier always has been a popular place to visit. Many people go to enjoy the beautiful forests that surround the mountain. Others go to climb the mountain.

Hazard Stevens and Philemon VanTrump became the first people known to reach the top of Mount Rainier. They reached the top in August of 1870 after a 10-hour climb through the snow.

In 1890, a young schoolteacher became the first woman to reach the top. Her name was Fay Fuller. For many years after her successful climb, she wrote newspaper stories asking the federal government to make Mount Rainier a national park. Many people who visited the mountain also wanted it to be protected forever by the government.

On March second, 1899, President William McKinley signed a law that made Mount Rainier a national park. It was the fifth national park established in the United States.

Today, National Park Service experts say about 10,000 people attempt to climb the huge mountain each year. But only about half of the climbers reach the top.

The mountain can be extremely difficult to climb. Severe weather is possible at almost any time. Snow and ice cover parts of the mountain all year. Many people have died trying to climb Mount Rainier. Mountain climbing experts often use it as a difficult test for people who want to climb some of the world’s highest mountains.

You do not have to climb the huge mountain to enjoy Mount Rainier National Park. More than 1,000,000 people visit the park each year. Many walk on

the hundreds of kilometers of paths. The paths lead through flat meadows filled with wild flowers and up through forests of large old trees. Other visitors drive around the park to experience its natural beauty. They often see black tailed deer, elk, and mountain goats.

The park is large. It is almost one hundred thousand hectares. Many lakes, rivers, roads, two hotels and six camping areas are inside the borders of the park.

Experts agree that Mount Rainier will become a very active volcano at sometime in the future. They say the real problem is that they do not know when. Experts also agree that the great heat produced by an explosion of the volcano would melt the rivers of ice that are part of the mountain. This could happen in only a few minutes. They say the melting ice would produce flowing rivers of mud and rock. People who live in the southern part of Seattle and in the city of Tacoma, Washington would be in danger.

Experts carefully study conditions at Mount Rainier. They hope to be able to warn of any dangerous change. But for now, the great mountain provides a safe and beautiful place to visit in the Northwest area of the United States.

A very different kind of national park is in the eastern state of Pennsylvania. It is called Valley Forge National Historical Park. It is near the city of Philadelphia.

Valley Forge also is a beautiful place. Within the park are many different kinds of trees and flowers. Huge areas of green grass. And a beautiful, slow moving river. You can see many deer. Often you can come very near deer. The animals do not run away because they very often see people in the park.

It is not the natural beauty that made Valley Forge a National Historic Park. It is what happened there. Many other places were important in the American War for Independence, but no other place is so filled with suffering. No battle was fought at Valley Forge. Yet, more than 2,000 soldiers of the small American army died there. They died of hunger, disease and the fierce cold in the winters of 1777 and 1778.

It was also at Valley Forge that the men of this small army learned to be real soldiers.

What happened at Valley Forge began in August of 1777. A British force threatened to capture the American capital at Philadelphia. The American

commander, General George Washington, moved the army to defend the city. A battle was fought at a place called Brandywine and another at Germantown. The British forces won those battles and occupied Philadelphia.

By the month of December, General Washington needed to find a place his small army could easily defend. He chose Valley Forge. More than 15 centimeters of snow fell only a few days after the army arrived. Ice covered the rivers. The soldiers began building very small wooden houses called log cabins. They built more than one thousand of these small houses.

The fierce winter was only one of the many problems the American army faced. Many of the soldiers had no shoes. Most had no winter clothing. All suffered from a severe lack of food. Then, several diseases struck. Typhus, typhoid, dysentery and pneumonia were among the diseases that spread through the army. Most of the soldiers became sick. Many died. General Washington wrote letters to Congress asking for help. He asked for money to buy food and clothing. But Congress had no money to give him.

Several things happened to change the small army during that long and terrible winter. General Washington knew the army had been defeated in the past because of a lack of real training. A man named Baron Friedrich von Steuben had recently come from Europe. He was an expert at training soldiers. So, each day during the terrible winter, Baron von Steuben taught the men of the American army to be soldiers. He also taught them something very important. He taught them to believe in themselves.

As the winter passed, the army slowly changed. New troops arrived. New equipment arrived. An alliance with France brought guarantees of military support. The men who survived that terrible winter were no longer a group of armed citizens. They were well-trained soldiers who no longer feared the enemy.

When the American army left Valley Forge on June 19th, 1778, the soldiers took with them the spirit that had helped them to survive. The War for Independence would continue for another five years. Terrible battles were yet to be fought. However, the men who had survived the winter in Valley Forge knew they could win. They did.

Today, you can visit the area where Baron von Steuben trained the soldiers of the American Revolution. You can watch a movie about the American soldiers' struggle to survive that long ago winter. You can see examples of the small log cabins the soldiers built. You can walk on paths along the

remains of the defense system and the officers' headquarters. And you can feel the spirit of Valley Forge.