“The Prayer at Valley Forge” — The Eye Witness Testimony of Isaac Potts

This story is well documented in the historical records. Our chief source is the eyewitness testimony of Isaac Potts, a Valley Forge resident who was 26 years old at the time of the encampment. Like most other Quakers, he was opposed to the war, but remained at Valley Forge during its occupation by the American forces, supervising the grinding of the grain, which Washington ordered neighboring farmers to bring to his army. The fullest account of Potts’ testimony is in the “Diary and Remembrances” of the Rev. Nathaniel Randolph Snowden (1770-1851), an ordained Presbyterian minister and a graduate of Princeton. On the following page, the Rev. Snowden recounts this encounter with Potts, by then a prominent citizen.

I was riding with him (Mr. Potts) in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, near Valley Forge, where the army lay during the war of the Revolution. Mr. Potts was a Senator in our state and a Whig. I told him I was agreeably surprised to find him a friend to his country as the Quakers were mostly Tories. He said, “It was so and I was a rank Tory once, for I never believed that America could proceed against Great Britain whose fleets and armies covered the land and ocean, but something very extraordinary converted me to the Good Faith!”

“What was that,” I inquired? “Do you see that woods, and that plain?” “It was about a quarter of a mile off from the place we were riding, as it happened.” “There,” said he, “laid the army of Washington. It was a most distressing time of ye war, and all were for giving up the Ship but that great and good man.” “In that woods,” pointing to a close in view, “I heard a plaintive sound as, of a man at prayer. I tied my horse to a sapling and went quietly into the woods and to my astonishment I saw the great George Washington on his knees alone, with his sword on one side and his cocked hat on the other. He was at Prayer to the God of the Armies, beseeching to interpose with his Divine aid, as it was His crisis, and the cause of the country, of humanity and of the world.”

“Such a prayer I never heard from the lips of man. I left him alone praying. I went home and told my wife, ‘I saw a sight and heard today what I never saw or heard before’, and just related to her what I had seen and heard and observed. We never thought a man could be a soldier and a Christian, but if there is one in the world, it is Washington. She also was astonished. We thought it was the cause of God, and America could prevail.”

Potts was not the only man who claimed to see Washington praying at Valley Forge. A quite different account was recorded in an article in The Aldine Press, and was based on the author’s conversations with Revolutionary War veterans. In this account, Washington was seen kneeling at silent prayer in a barn where his horse was kept. Some have construed the differences between this and the Potts account as evidence that both were legendary. The more probable explanation is that each records a separate instance – in other words, that Washington, like any prayerful man facing a crisis, prayed more than once.