After being forced out of Philadelphia by the British, George Washington's Continental Army spent the harsh winter of 1777-1778 at Valley Forge along the Schuylkill River, about 25 miles northwest of center-city. Archaeological investigations conducted by the National Park Service for more than a half-century included large-scale excavations, remote sensing, such as ground-penetrating radar and sophisticated metal detectors to locate concentrations of artifacts, and architectural foundations of buildings and structures used by Washington's soldiers. Even though Washington ordered living quarters to be neatly laid out in rows, dietary evidence indicates the soldiers’ diet included beef and pork in somewhat better conditions than were haphazardly placed in groups by battalion. Evidence suggests that the food was consumed in a variety of ways, including casual eating and group gatherings.

In September of 1777, after his victory at the Battle of Brandywine, General Sir William Howe and his British army marched into Philadelphia. However, General Howe encountered a supply problem. He was surrounded by George Washington's Continental Army; more importantly, the Royal British Navy could not move supplies up the Delaware River to the city because two American forts protected the river at Valley Forge along the Schuylkill River, about 25 miles northwest of center-city. Archaeological investigations conducted by the National Park Service for more than a half-century included large-scale excavations, remote sensing, such as ground-penetrating radar and sophisticated metal detectors to locate concentrations of artifacts, and architectural foundations of buildings and structures used by Washington's soldiers. Even though Washington ordered living quarters to be neatly laid out in rows, dietary evidence indicates the soldiers’ diet included beef and pork in somewhat better conditions than were haphazardly placed in groups by battalion. Evidence suggests that the food was consumed in a variety of ways, including casual eating and group gatherings.

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The Hospital

The medical needs of the Continental Army had grown dire by autumn 1777. More than 20 percent of the 18,000 soldiers were either sick or wounded. Military hospitals were established in several outlying Pennsylvania communities while General George Washington quartered his troops at Valley Forge for the winter. The religious community of Ephrata, Lancaster County, known today as Ephrata Cloister, was one of the selected hospital sites. Archaeological excavations conducted by The State Museum of Pennsylvania between 1999 and 2003 discovered hundreds of artifacts, proving that the community's Mount Zion dormitory and prayer house were used for this purpose. The recovered artifacts include lead musket balls, gun flints, gun parts, a bayonet, marked regimental buttons, glass medicine vials and an iron brazier (similar to a camp stove). By June 1778, the Ephrata hospital was closed. Of the 252 sick and wounded soldiers who received care, 57 died. In addition, several Cloister members made the ultimate sacrifice during their service as nurses and succumbed to an outbreak of typhus or typhoid fever.

The Civil War

A visitor’s accidental discovery of human bone fragments in the northern section of Gettysburg National Military Park resulted in perhaps the only archaeologically-recovered burial from the historic battlefield. Historic documents indicate significant casualties occurred in this railroad cut between Union and Confederate troops on July 1, 1863, the first day of the Battle of Gettysburg. In the aftermath of the three-day bloodbath on Adams County’s farmlands and fields, thousands lay dead and were hastily buried. The archeological excavation, analysis and interpretation of this burial resulted in initial identification and subsequent reburying in a marked grave at the park. These skeletal remains contained an archive of clues about the life and death of this soldier who fought during the American Civil War that were revealed through archaeology.

The Niagara

“We have met the enemy and they are ours; two ships, two brigs, one schooner, and one sloop,” Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry wrote in his famous report to General William Henry Harrison. On June 22, 1812, the United States declared war on England. Not long after, men and supplies poured into Erie to construct a fleet of ships which would ultimately prove to be an unstoppable fighting force. The Battle of Lake Erie on September 10, 1813, saw the defeat of the British at Put-in-Bay, Ohio, and gave control of the Great Lakes to the United States, eliminating the threat on the northwestern frontier by British forces and raising the morale of Americans. Hastily built in 1813 — and victorious in battle — Commodore Perry’s relief flagship, Niagara, was scuttled in 1820 to preserve it from being crushed by ice on Lake Erie. To commemorate the centennial of the battle in 1913, the remains of Niagara were raised and a ship rebuilt upon them. The cycle was repeated in 1943 and 1988. The process of reconstructing the vessel enabled maritime specialists to examine this significant symbol of the nation’s military might while preserving an icon of American history and archaeological heritage. It also allowed them to identify a number of technical problems in the design of the vessel, particularly its broad deck and tall masts which caused it to be top-heavy and unstable in strong winds.

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First shots fired of Revolutionary War at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts

April 1775

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July 1776

Washington's troops endure harsh winter at Valley Forge

December 1777

British defeated at Battle of Yorktown, Virginia which marks the end of the Revolutionary War

October 1781

Whiskey Rebellion occurs in western Pennsylvania as a result of outrage over excessive taxation

July 1794

War of 1812 begins over trade issues

June 1812

Opening of the Main Line of Public Works Canal and railroad system included the Columbia and Philadelphia Railroad

October 1834

Pennsylvania revises Constitution. Blacks lose right to vote (are disenfranchised)

February 1838

Fugitive Slave Act passes making it illegal to aid escaped slaves

September 1850

Battle of Gettysburg

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Confederate Army surrenders at Appomattox Courthouse ending the Civil War

April 1865

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Pennsylvania is often referred to as the "birthplace of freedom" and the "keystone of the nation," but earning these epithets did not come easily for the early colonists who helped establish the United States. Charter in 1681, William Penn's colony was comprised of a diverse ethnicity dominated by Germans, Scots-Irish and English with equally varied religious practices. The social and religious dynamics of Pennsylvania are important in understanding its initial reluctance to join the War for Independence. An internal struggle, the commonwealth erupted in 1776 when the first state constitution was drafted in Philadelphia. It replaced the hierarchical colonial society under the proprietary rule of the Penn family. In its place was a freer, more democratic state constitution. This break from Penn family rule and its Quaker pacifist tradition empowered the Scots-Irish on the western frontier and led to radical movements to break from British rule. The abundance of raw materials in Pennsylvania played a critical role in commerce with England. In turn, Pennsylvania was a large consumer of imported goods. However, growing resistance to taxation by England and a rising sense of patriotism in the colonies prompted a call to arms for Pennsylvanians.

At the dawn of the American Revolution Pennsylvania was the third largest colony and contributed abundant supplies and labor, essential to the development of our new nation. Philadelphia was the largest city in North America with a population of nearly 30,000 residents. It served as our nation's capital during most of the rebellion and as an important ocean port to the Delaware Bay. The city's location and contributes to our understanding of its pivotal role in this significant naval engagement.

Over time the commonwealth's constitution underwent additional revisions. Initial versions of the constitution allowed all men, including free Negroes to vote. Pennsylvania's support of the abolition movement was demonstrated early on as one of the first colonies to pass the Gradual Abolition of Slavery Act in 1780. These laws provided opportunities beyond those of many enslaved in the South. Support of the abolition movement led to the advancement of the Underground Railroad, a secret network of safe houses has been difficult to identify, but the encouragement of Pennsylvanians for the anti-slavery movement was key to our involvement in the American Civil War.

Pennsylvania's industries had grown into a factory system, a shift that resulted in increased production in textile manufacturing, leather making, lumbering and tobacco. The coal industry fueled industries and forges for iron production, as well as steam locomotives and factories. Iron and steel production had facilitated the fabrication of half of the nation's industrial products. The expansive railroad system which had begun in the 1830s enabled Pennsylvania to efficiently transport supplies to Union forces. Upwards of 350,000 men enlisted in Pennsylvania's regiments, including 8,600 African Americans. More than 33,000 Pennsylvanians were killed in action or later died of wounds, disease or illness. The fiercely fought Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863, one of the realities of war to Pennsylvania. This three-day battle in Adams County was the bloodiest of the war, costing the lives of 55,000 Americans. Their remains continue to tell the story of the terrible conflict. The Union victory created a renewed sense of patriotism in many communities and steps were taken almost immediately to preserve this hallowed ground.

Pennsylvania experienced many growing pains throughout the period from 1776 to 1865, but resilience allowed citizens to endure strife and emerge strong and vibrant. The commonwealth has long been called the Keystone State because of its importance to the nation. It supplied raw materials and contributed to intellectual, artistic and political thought and action, vast resources and its geographical location in the new nation. Its natural resources supplied both state and nation with materials necessary for manufacturing advancements that enabled continued growth and might during the Industrial Revolution. Archaeological investigations conducted at many historic sites and properties has provided us with unbiased documentation of these important historical events. They presented us with the personal effects of those who served for our country, their sacrifices and, ultimately, a better understanding of this turbulent time in Pennsylvania and American history.