

Ford by an ancient, rickety bridge. Sullivan's Division, including all of the Maryland battalions, had crossed the bridge and another division had begun to cross when a British force of some 3,500 men commanded by General Cornwallis was discovered holding a commanding position on a hill overlooking the ford. Cornwallis, who was on a foraging expedition, had caught the Americans by chance in an embarrassing and virtually defenseless position. Washington was able to return most of his men across the river safely, retreating with them back to Whitemarsh, but the affair further added to the delay in establishing winter quarters.

By December 14 Washington and his men had once again crossed the Schuylkill on a bridge made of sunken wagons and had encamped at the Gulph, five miles from their ultimate destination--Valley Forge. In his general orders of December 17, Washington carefully explained to his officers and men that the necessity of remaining sufficiently close to Philadelphia to prevent plundering of the surrounding countryside by the enemy had convinced him of the necessity "to take post in the neighbourhood of this camp." The general added that "with activity and diligence Huts may be erected that will be warm and dry. In these the troops will be compact, more secure against surprises than if in a divided state and at hand to protect the country." The general concluded that the next day, December 18, was "the day set apart by the Honorable Congress for public Thanksgiving and Praise," ordering "that the army remain in its present quarters, and that the Chaplains perform divine service with their several Corps and brigades."

Many of Washington's men considered the order to attend divine services for a day of thanksgiving on December 18 a mockery. The weather had been exceedingly bad, especially since so many of the men had no shoes, blankets, or coats. Major Dearborn recorded that on December 16 "the weather was "Cold & wet which renders our Living in Tents very uncomfortable." Similar conditions prevailed on the 17th and 18th, and concerning the thanksgiving festivities on the latter day Dearborn wrote: "This is Thanksgiving Day thro the whole Continent of America--but god knows We have very Little to keep it with this being the third Day we have been without flour or bread--& are living on Cold Ground, upon the whole I think all we have to be thankful for is that we are alive & not in the Grave with many of our friends." Dearborn's meal that thanksgiving day consisted of "some Exceeding Poor beef which had been boild & Now warm^d in an old short handled frying Pan in which we ware Obligated to Eat it haveing No other Platter." Another soldier, Sgt. Ebenezer Wilk, complained of his "poor thanksgiving--nothing but fresh beef and flour to eat, without any salt, and but very scant of that." Perhaps the most