Contemporary American Heritage Art:
"The Prayer at Valley Forge"
by Arnold Friberg

provided by the American Heritage Education Foundation, Inc.
www.americanheritage.org

Fascinating Artist's Notes about "The Prayer at Valley Forge"
(appearing on americanheritage.org)

Arnold Friberg writes, "Since I was a boy, I have revered General Washington. At age twelve I drew what I thought a fine picture of him astride his white horse. Along with learning the American legend of his praying at Valley Forge, this deep inspiration of boyhood was never to leave me.

And so it was that I waited many years to picture him again, in prayer now, in the snow, dismounted from his strong horse - only this time in the full power and richness of oil colors.

To prepare for this painting, to insure accuracy in trees and landscape, I made a pilgrimage to Valley Forge, in the dead of winter. In the summer the place is filled with visitors. But now, in the snows of February, it was deserted, the wind moaning through the great trees - silent, lonely, cold. It was a cold that chilled to the bone, a cold that froze my fingers until I could no longer sketch nor even snap my camera.

To insure accuracy in man-made things, I sought out whatever museums, collections, libraries, or informed individuals could offer on horse gear or uniform. At the Smithsonian Military History Museum, I made minutely accurate sketches from the very uniform actually worn by Washington. As for facial likeness, I studied every portrait ever sketched, carved, or painted from life, but always keeping in mind how cold and rawboned he must have looked during that winter encampment. But such research, vital as it is, provides only physical facts. What I really tried for was, through the medium of paint, to recall the pain, the cold of that cruel winter of 1777-78.

I sought to pay tribute to the tall and heavy-burdened man who alone held our struggling nation together. For while the British grew fat and warm and well fed in Philadelphia, it was the man Washington who stayed with his starving and freezing army through that dreadful winter at Valley Forge. It was in desperation that he wrote to the governor of New Jersey, 'Our sick naked, our well naked, our unfortunate men in captivity naked!' With his own countrymen indifferent to their condition, where else could he turn but to God?

It should be plain to anyone that this is a symbolic picture, rather than a historically recorded event. The well-known American legend is without documentation. But from Washington's own words there can be no doubt of his deep and humble dependence upon whom he chose to call 'that all wise and powerful Being on whom alone our success depends.'

It is my hope that coming through this picture will once again whisper the spirit of Valley Forge, of suffering and devotion and pain, of liberty, and of the hand of God in the affairs of men."

Available at Friberg Fine Art, www.fribergfineart.com.

Washington's Faith and Two Possible Accounts of Washington Praying at Valley Forge
www.ushistory.org/valleyforge/washington/prayer.html

A Prayer of George Washington

"Almighty God: We make our earnest prayer that thou wilt keep the United States in thy holy protection; that thou wilt incline the hearts of the citizens to cultivate a spirit of subordination and obedience to government; and entertain a brotherly affection and love for one another and for their fellow citizens of the United States at large. And finally that thou wilt most graciously be pleased to dispose us all to do justice, to love mercy and to demean ourselves with that clarity, humility and pacific temper of mind which were the characteristics of the divine author of our blessed religion, and without a humble imitation of whose example in these things we can never hope to be a happy nation. Grant our supplication, we beseech thee, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."