

Chapter 8



## **Crossing the Delaware**

### **A Turning Point of the Revolution**

It was Christmas day in 1776. The American soldiers in the Continental Army crowded around campfires, trying to shake off the chill of the bleak December day. A cloud of despair hung over the men. Missing their families, the soldiers felt the War for Independence was already lost. In the distance, the Delaware River floated by. It was the only thing between them and the English. Discouragement and despair seemed to envelop those in the fight for freedom in America. The men in George Washington's army never guessed they would soon be engaged in another battle—only this time they would be victorious.

The campaign of 1776 resulted in one defeat after another for the Continental Army. At New York they barely escaped complete annihilation, and from there they lost battles at White Plains and Fort Mifflin. As they retreated, the British pursued them like hounds chasing a fox. Miraculously, the fox in this case always managed to escape. Congress was disheartened by the progress of the war and began discussing replacing Washington with General Charles Lee. Lee was an ambitious, unreliable, and

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untrustworthy man, but before Lee was made commander in chief, the British captured him.

Washington knew his country and men needed a victory, and when Cornwallis made the mistake of stretching out his army, Washington knew he must act. Since Cornwallis needed the men to live off the land, he divided his force and garrisoned them at Bordentown, Burlington, Mount Holly, Princeton, and Trenton. Many of the American soldiers were nearly done serving their enlistment, and Washington knew he must proceed quickly—while he still had an army. He decided to attack the Hessian troops at Trenton. The Hessians were a German mercenary force, foreign soldiers employed by the British.

On Christmas Eve, Washington communicated the final plans to his generals. They would cross the Delaware River at three places and surprise the enemy. General John Cadwalader and Adjutant General Joseph Reed were to cross at Bristol with fifteen hundred men and attack Burlington. General James Ewing and seven hundred men were to hold the bridge at Assunpink Creek, which was at the end of Queen Street in Trenton. Leading the third part of the attack would be Washington himself. He, along with Generals Greene, Sullivan, and Stirling and twenty-four hundred soldiers of the Continental Army, would cross the Delaware at McKonkey's Ferry. Closer to Trenton, they would divide their force and attack the town from two sides. Operations would begin on Christmas Day, and if all went well they would reach Trenton at five o'clock on December 26, 1776.

As the disheartened Continental Army formed ranks, they were told the password with which they could distinguish friend from foe. It was "Victory or Death."

Each man received enough food for three days and sixty rounds of ammunition. Marching through a frigid rain, they arrived at McKonkey's Ferry around dusk. The Delaware River was higher than usual and congested with ice. Soon a

storm was roaring. Although the squall helped cover their noise, it also slowed their progress.

While Henry Knox managed the crossing on the Pennsylvania side, Washington oversaw the troops as they landed on the New Jersey side. The passage was made in Durham boats, which had flat bottoms and high sides. In charge of the boats were Colonel John Glover and the experienced sailors from Marblehead, Massachusetts. (These sailors had come to Washington's aid before, when he and his men were cornered at Brooklyn. John Glover and his men helped them escape under cover of darkness.)

Since the boats were somewhere between forty to sixty feet long, nearly forty men could be transported at a time. Getting the horses and cannons loaded and across proved to be the most difficult part of the night. Finally, at three in the morning on December 26, 1776, all of Washington's army was on the New Jersey side. By now they were three hours behind schedule and could never reach Trenton before daybreak. Yet Washington was determined to advance!

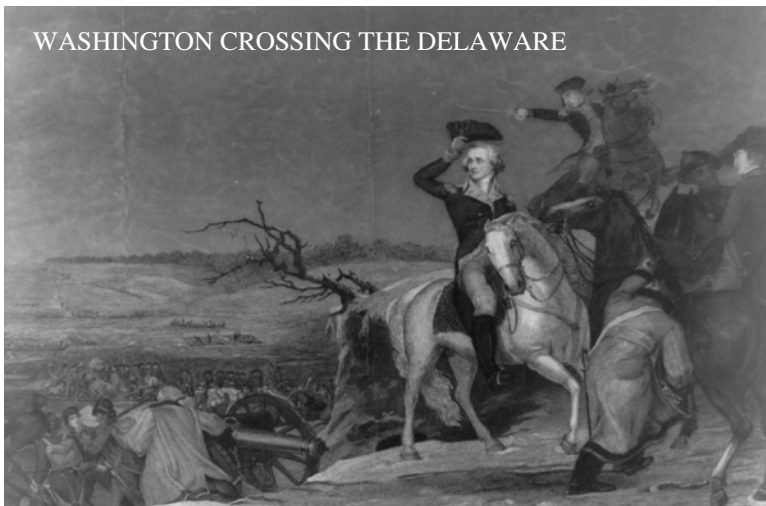
The march to Trenton was treacherous. A furious storm with alternating rain, snow, sleet, and hail hindered every step, and a bitterly cold wind ripped at their faces. Many soldiers had only rags instead of shoes on their feet, and they suffered terribly. Along the march, two men froze to death. Of the three-pronged plan, only Washington was able to advance. The storm held the others back.

The commander of the Hessian troops at Trenton was Colonel Rall, who had displayed great valor and bravery at the battles of White Plains and Fort Mifflin. Although Colonel Rall received warning of the Americans' intended attack, he did not take them seriously. He even received a message from a Loyalist shortly before the battle, but he put it in his pocket unread. On Christmas Day, the Hessians celebrated the holiday in the flamboyant German fashion.

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Despite the delays, the Continental Army was able to make a surprise attack. At approximately eight o'clock in the morning, the first fighting began when General Greene and his men met guards on the Pennington Road. The storm was blowing into the faces of the Hessians and gave the advancing Americans the advantage. In an orderly retreat, the Hessians made their way to Trenton.

The town of Trenton had two main roads going through it: King Street and Queen Street, which ran parallel to each other. By the time the startled Hessians assembled, Knox's artillery held positions at the heads of both King and Queen Streets. A grueling fight began. The element of surprise added to the confusion. The Hessians placed a field gun on King Street and might have done real damage to the Americans, but the patriots seized the gun and used it against the Hessians instead! Colonel Rall rallied his men who were enduring heavy fire. Under a shower of bullets, the Hessians retreated to an orchard southeast of town. After Colonel Rall was mortally wounded, the Hessians surrendered. In less than forty-five minutes the battle was over, and the jubilant Continental Army was victorious.



Washington had won the day without the loss of one man in battle. Of the Hessians, twenty-one were killed, ninety were wounded, and over nine hundred were taken prisoner. Only five hundred Hessians escaped. Taking the baggage of the vanquished, the Americans added six cannons and one thousand muskets to their supplies.

The British were stunned when they learned of the American victory at Trenton. When Lord Cornwallis received the news, he was on the verge of sailing for England to see his sick wife. Instead, he journeyed back to New Jersey with the intent of defeating Washington and the rebels. Soon, all of the United States was praising Washington and his Continental Army for their glorious victory. Discouraged people began to hope that the war could be won, and Congress was happy to retain Washington as commander of the troops.

After the victory, the army marched back to McKonkey's Ferry again and recrossed the Delaware. Nearly a week later, Washington led a surprise attack on the British at Princeton. Again the Americans tasted the sweet fruit of victory.

The American triumph at Trenton was the turning point of the American Revolution. Having held the patriots in contempt, the British were now forced to respect them. In early December of 1776, the young nation had reached its lowest point. The war seemed hopeless and defeat inevitable, but the daring crossing of the Delaware and the subsequent victory at Trenton were a balm to the reeling and weak nation.

Convinced that Washington was the most able leader of the army, Congress wisely kept him in that capacity until the conflict ended. Many men now began to enlist, and filling the ranks was not difficult.

America suffered many other setbacks during the conflict with Great Britain, but never was the war in such a state of despair as it had been before Trenton. If the bold

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surprise had not been undertaken at such a critical time, it is quite possible that the United States of America might have lost the Revolutionary War.

### **Digging Deeper**

Why was the Continental Army so discouraged in December of 1776?

Where did Washington cross the Delaware?

Who was the commander of the Hessian troops at Trenton?

How many Americans were killed during the battle of Trenton?

Read *The Boys of '76* by Charles C. Coffin. This book was written in the 1880s, and it is an excellent manuscript that gives a firsthand account of the American Revolution.

Find a map of Trenton during Washington's campaign (*The Revolutionary War* by Bart McDowell has a map on page 104, or go to this link: <http://www.britishbattles.com/battle-trenton.htm>). Draw the layout of the town on a large piece of paper; construction or art paper would work well. Using beans or toy soldiers, reenact the battle on the paper.