

Washington Crossing the Delaware and the Battle of Trenton

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Historical Background

Fall of 1776 had been disastrous for Washington's army. The British army had decisively driven the American troops out of New York City. Washington narrowly escaped the Battle of Long Island, miraculously transporting his surviving army across the East River through a thick fog. Conveying an army across a river was no easy feat, particularly under the nose of the powerful British navy. From New York City Washington had suffered other defeats and had eventually retreated from Manhattan, through New Jersey, finally fleeing across the Delaware River into Pennsylvania. As winter set in, transporting troops and supplies across semi-frozen rivers and along mucky roads became even more difficult. Armies generally hunkered down through winter and early spring, and most people expected Washington to appreciate the reprieve from fighting.

By the end of December Washington's troops were demoralized by the events of that fall. Almost 90% of his soldiers from the battle of Long Island had been killed, captured, or had deserted. And, what was more troublesome for the American cause was that most of the remaining soldiers' enlistments would end within a few days. Supplies were short and the likelihood of victory seemed remote—conditions that were not ideal for recruiting or for gaining reenlistments. Washington wrote a letter home to Virginia admitting, "I think the game is pretty near up."

British leaders also doubted the ability of the American army to survive the winter of 1776-77. However, they did not let their guard down. This was particularly true of the Hessian soldiers who were settling for the winter into the small town of Trenton, New Jersey. Hessians were German-speaking soldiers, named for the state in Germany that they called home. The Hessians had been contracted to fight for the British and had a reputation for being excellent, though brutal, soldiers. Their commander, Colonel Johan Rall, was aware that Americans could launch an attack against his troops in Trenton and took precautions against a surprise.

Crossing the Delaware River and the Battle of Trenton

Washington knew that something must be done to boost the morale of his rag tag army before their enlistments were up. In late December, 1776, he circulated among his soldiers Thomas Paine's newly published pamphlet, *The American Crisis*. "These are the times that try men's souls," Paine began. "The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman." Putting actions behind these words, Washington spent Christmas night in 1776 conveying his soldiers and artillery in flat bottomed boats called scows across the Delaware River about 9 miles from Trenton.

Washington hoped to have everyone across by midnight so that he could march unnoticed to Trenton and attack at dawn. However, a winter storm struck just at dusk. Rain turned to hail then snow then driving sleet. Temperatures dropped, creating icy conditions for loading and unloading soldiers, horses, and heavy cannons. Chunks of floating ice interfered with the crossing. It was not until 4:00 that the American troops and artillery had all arrived on the New Jersey side and began the freezing, soggy march toward Trenton. General James Ewing, who was supposed to support Washington's movements by crossing of the Delaware with his 700-man militia called off his attempt. Running late, and without Ewing's support, Washington had little hope of success but knew that his soldiers would be discovered and massacred if they tried to re-cross the river. He had no choice but to forge ahead.

Miraculously, the storm that slowed Washington's movements also prevented Hessian lookouts from discovering the Americans until they arrived at town. Henry Knox positioned the artillery and the attack commenced. Hessian soldiers exited houses in confusion as American cannons and infantry fired. The well-disciplined Hessians tried unsuccessfully to move into battle formation. A brief but violent struggle ensued during which several Hessian officers, including Colonel Rall, fell. Within an hour the remaining Hessian army surrendered. With very few casualties among his army of about 2,400 men, Washington had captured a Hessian army of 1,200. By noon the Americans were back on the Pennsylvania side of the river, celebrating their victory.

The Effects of the Battle of Trenton

Although the numbers involved in the Battle of Trenton were relatively small, the victory inspired the colonists. Soldiers, who otherwise would have returned to their homes the following week, reenlisted. New recruits joined the patriot cause. Doubts about Washington's leadership, which had been growing since New York, began to fade. Washington followed up his victory at Trenton with another triumph at nearby Princeton a week later. Emanuel Leutze memorialized Washington's crossing of the Delaware River in a painting in 1851, an image of questionable accuracy that has become an icon of American History.

Lesson Idea

1. Give students some historical background on Washington's Crossing and the Battle of Trenton. Be sure to help them understand that the movement of troops, especially across rivers and during the winter was difficult and hazardous.
2. Show students Emanuel Leutze's 1851 painting, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Have students list what they observe in the painting. Show them ¼ of the painting at a time so they can focus on details.
3. Give students the following primary source evidence. Have them highlight in yellow details in the primary sources that agree with the painting and have them highlight in orange details that disagree.
4. Lead the class in a discussion of the painting. What is the better source, the painting or the primary sources? What was accurate in the painting? What was inaccurate? Why might Leutze have included inaccurate details? How would you change the painting to make it more accurate?

Source 1: Letter written by George Washington to the Continental Congress on December 27, 1776. (Modified to make it easier to understand)

Sir, I have the pleasure of reporting to you the success of an effort I made against a group of the enemy lying in Trenton and which took place yesterday morning. The evening of the 25th I ordered the troops that were going to be used for this work to gather behind McKonkey's Ferry, so that they could begin to cross the river as soon as it became dark, expecting that we would be able to get everyone across with the necessary artillery [cannons] by 12 o'clock, and that we could easily arrive at Trenton by five in the morning, the distance being about 9 miles. But the quantity of ice made that night blocked the passage of the boats so that it was three o'clock before the artillery could get over and about four before the troops began to march. This made me doubt that we would surprise the town because I knew we could not reach it before dawn, but I was sure that there was no way to retreat without being seen and attacked as we tried to re-cross the river, so I decided to move ahead anyway.

Source 2: Excerpts from the diary of American Colonel John Fitzgerald who crossed the Delaware River with Washington written December 25-26. (Modified to make it easier to understand)

Christmas, 6 PM It is fearfully cold and raw and a snow storm setting in. The wind is northeast and beats in the faces of the men. It will be a terrible night for the soldiers who have no shoes. Some of them have tied old rags around their feet, but I have not heard a man complain.... I have never seen Washington so determined as he is now... He stands on the bank of the stream, wrapped in his cloak, watching the landing of his troops. He is calm and collected, but very determined. The storm is changing to sleet and cuts like a knife...

[3 A.M.] I am writing in the ferry house. The troops are all across, and the boats have gone back for the artillery. We are three hours behind the set time... [the fishermen directing the boats] have a hard time to force the boats through the floating ice with the snow drifting in their faces....

Source 3: Memoir of John Greenwood an American soldier who crossed the Delaware, written in 1809. The Wartime Services of John Greenwood: A Young Patriot in the American Revolution. (Modified to make it easier to understand)

A day or two after reaching Newton we were gathered one afternoon to march and attack Trenton. If I remember right the sun was about half an hour high and shining brightly, but it had no sooner set then it began to drizzle or grow wet, and when we came to the river it rained. Every man had 60 rounds of cartridges given to him, and as I then had a gun, as indeed every officer had, I put the number which I received, some in my pockets and some in my cartridge-box. Over the river we then went in a flat bottomed scow, and as I was the first that crossed, we had to wait for the rest and so began to pull down the fences and make fires to warm ourselves, for the storm was increasing rapidly. After a while it rained, hailed, snowed, and froze, and at the same time blew a perfect hurricane... The noise of the soldiers coming over and clearing away the ice, the rattling of the Canon wheels on the frozen ground, and the cheerfulness of my fellow comrades as I knowledge myself to be, I felt great pleasure, more than I do now in writing about it. After our men had all crossed—and there were not, as I could see, more [than] 200 of us – we began an apparent circuitous march, not advancing faster than a child 10 years old could walk, and stopping frequently, though for what purpose I know not.

