



The American Revolution

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Sons of the American Revolution

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Author, Dr. Patrick D. Hollis

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IV. The Winter of 1776 - 77, The Trenton and Princeton Battles:

Well, readers! It is time for us to pause for retrospective thought. We have the benefit of the 'Monday Morning Quarterback' position and the sharpness of 20 / 20 hind site. In the winter of 1776 - 77, General George Washington had no such luxuries. He and his army had fought three large and costly battles, and had lost all three of them. The British army had landed unopposed on Long Island and from that position beat back the American army to the Delaware River separating the New Jersey Colony from the Pennsylvania Colony.

On the negative side, the British had out maneuvered General Washington in each engagement, had overwhelmed him with superior fire power, and pushed him from the battlefield with firm authority. General Washington had assumed command of the American army and performed his initial success at Boston, but since that time, he and his army had repeatedly failed to measure up to the British pressure. Add to these

failures the fact that daily, American troops were deserting, while others were completing their enlistments and returning home.

These terrible times show the character and will of this man George Washington. To his way of thinking, there was another way to view these circumstances (today we call it 'looking outside the box') and General Washington was thinking in a positive fashion. He had repeatedly held the line against numerically, and materially superior forces, inflicted great harm to those forces, and each time had managed to escape the field with his army intact and still a functional threat to the British. Washington had rightly calculated that as long as he and the American army were still in the field, the British had not won the war and America had hope.

In 1776, the armies of the world fighting in the Northern Hemisphere stopped all martial activity in December due to the great difficulties brought on by winter conditions. So, General Washington had safely conveyed his entire army across the Delaware River from New Jersey into Pennsylvania, and encamped near the present day town of Morrisville, Pennsylvania. It seemed evident to all observers that Washington's intentions were to make winter camp in this location. The British army proceeded in a similar fashion and set up winter quarters across the Delaware River in Trenton, New Jersey. British General Howe was convinced that in the spring his army would cross the Delaware and finish the defeat of the American army.

General Howe was so confident of his predicted outcome to the hostilities, that he had planned to sail back to England for winter relaxation, and General Cornwallis had excused himself from duties in order to spend winter in New York. Remaining on duty was the Hessian army, which was encamped at Trenton, New Jersey, and obliged to remain on duty in order to receive their pay as mercenaries. Colonel Johann Rall and his

immediate superior Colonel von Donop, along with Colonels Knyphausen and Lossberg, were looking forward to enjoying Christmas in Trenton, and completing the long distance supplying and provisioning of their army over winter.

General Washington encamped his army at McKonkey's Ferry on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware River, which was beginning to ice over. When Washington first arrived at camp, he had an army of six thousand men, but many were too ill for duty and others were near completion of their enlistments, so his army continued to shrink. General Horatio Gates with 2,000 men was up in the Hudson RiverValley area, and General Charles Lee was in western New Jersey with an equally Large number of men. On 20th of December, 1776, General Lee's 2,000 men arrived in Washington's camp under the leadership of General John Sullivan and without General Lee as he had managed to get himself captured by the British. Later that day General Gates arrived, but with only 600 of his men. Soon after this date, Colonel John Cadwalader from Pennsylvania arrived in camp with 1,000 volunteer militia from Pennsylvania. All of these actions had brought Washington's army up to a strength of 6,000 able men, and gave Washington the ability to plan an offensive action. By December 22, Washington had persuaded the militia concentrated near Mount Holly in southern New Jersey to make a demonstration against the British. This they did on the 23rd in the Battle of Iron Works Hill, thus drawing elements of British and Hessian armies farther south and exposing their rear flank for possible attack. Preparations for this attack began that very day, and by 24 December 1776, all of the available boats on the Delaware River had been delivered to General Washington.

This was to be a well-planned attack involving large river ferry boats for

transporting horses and wagons, special Durham Iron Works boats with shallow draft and high sides for transporting heavy iron pieces, and a small navy of row boats. The operation was to be executed by experienced waterman, seamen, dockworkers and ship builders from Philadelphia. The challenging logistics of this operation were turned over by Washington to the experienced hands of “The Savior of Boston,” Henry Knox. Following a meeting of the general staff and a “yes” vote, General Washington issued on 25 December 1776, plans for a surprise operation against the British. That afternoon at 4:00 PM the army was assembled for parade, and at the conclusion of this event every man was issued new flints, three days of rations, and told to maintain silence as they were departing on a secret mission. The men were marched out of camp in a column by eight, directed toward McKonkey’s Ferry.

General Washington was with the first troops, who made the crossing and deployed on the New Jersey shore in a sentry line to protect the remaining troops still in the river. General Ewing attempting to cross farther south was halted by ice jams in the river, and Colonel Cadwalader, who crossed above Washington got his infantry across, but discovered that his artillery could not make the trip. Upon learning this news, Cadwalader order his infantry back across the river to safety in Pennsylvania.

American mythology has it that the Hessian army was affected by heavy yule tide consumption of alcoholic beverages and so, believed to have been incapacitated. There is no historical evidence to support this popular contention. What actually happened was that the Hessians had been awakened several times nightly, by reports of American militia activity in the area, and were anxious, on edge, and slightly exhausted by the nocturnal activity. Colonel Rall’s part of the Hessian army was every bit of an excellent, well disciplined, professional fighting force, and a capable and worthy opponent to the

American army, or any other army for that matter. This Hessian army woke up at the crack of dawn on 26 December, when Washington's cannons announced his two pronged presence. It was an act of total surprise to the Hessian army, who had not taken the American army as a serious adversary. They were about to learn just how great a mistake that thought was.

This attack was marked by total surprise, complete and total panic on the part of the Hessians. In the course of battle that followed, it was the American artillery under the leadership of Henry Knox, that repeatedly bombarded the Hessian line of battle with canister and grape-shot, providing a much needed triumph on the part of the American troops. The American casualties were few with three Americans killed and six wounded, while the Hessians suffered 22 killed. Among the Hessians casualties were all four Colonels, including the mortally wounded Colonel Rall, and 98 wounded soldiers. Over 1,000 Hessians were taken prisoner, and almost more equipment and supplies than could be transported away became property of the Americans. Washington's role as a leader was reestablished, army morale was greatly boosted, and Congress found cause for renewed enthusiasm for the war. As we have often experienced in our story, the conclusion of one event is the precipitating factor, which becomes the prelude to still another event. This is the case with the Battle of Trenton, as it actually continues on into the immediate future as the Battle of Princeton. General Washington has just successfully concluded the Battle for Trenton, and has come to face the challenges of transporting his army, the army of Hessian prisoners, and a vast caravan of wagons carrying all of the bounty known as the spoils of war. He has become an expert in crossing the ice-clogged Delaware River.

In the course of this Trenton action, Washington had learned that British General Charles Cornwallis had returned to his command outside Princeton, and was moving his army in order to engage Washington. Meanwhile, the Delaware River north of Trenton had become ice-bound, and frozen such that Washington could again move his army across the river. Only on this occasion they could make the journey on foot.