Brig. Gen. Alexander Leslie

I am Brigadier General Alexander Leslie commanding the Second British Brigade that occupied Princeton much of the month of December 1776. From the time we went into winter quarters on December 14 until the battle of Trenton on December 26, I had a number of communications with Colonel Rall at Trenton in which I found him to be overly concerned about the American forces across the river from his post. After the battle of Trenton, and especially when Washington re-crossed the Delaware River again on December 29 and 30 to occupy Trenton, we became concerned that he might try to attack us at Princeton. Therefore, I ordered my officers who had engineering experience to determine the best locations for earthwork defenses to be erected and where our artillery pieces should be placed.

On December 30, I ordered men to construct fascine reinforced earthworks flanking the main Post Road as it entered the village of Princeton. The next morning, I ordered 100 men to begin construction of earthworks on the northwest end of town. I placed a strong guard of 100 men at the bridge over the Stoney Brook south of Princeton. My artillery was positioned at both ends of town and also to enfilade the road to Pennington in case any troops came from that direction. We felt that if Washington attacked, he would approach town from the south or west where the main roads were. The eastern side of town did not seem vulnerable.

Lt Charles Willson Peale

I am Lieutenant Charles Willson Peale of the Second Battalion of Philadelphia Associators. By training, I am an artist of some renown but am very motivated to lead my company of volunteers in the fight against the British. My company was at Crosswicks on January 1 and was ordered to march overnight to Trenton where we arrived the morning of January 2 and participated in the actions on that day, particularly towards the end of the day when the British forced us out of Trenton to our prepared positions on Mill Hill.

After the firing ceased, we were ordered to make our camp fires and get something to eat while we prepared to spend the night on Mill Hill and continue fighting in the morning. I "marched my company to the edge of the field, grounded our arms, made fires with the fence rails, and toked over the fatigues of the day; and some, after eating, laid themselves down to sleep." My captain had injured his leg some days before and found he could no longer lead the company. He recommended that I be placed in command, and I was. My first orders to my men were to take some of the baggage from the wagons and send the rest away.

While most Continental regiments assigned quartermaster responsibilities as a collateral duty to a junior line officer, companies like mine were on their own and as the man in command, I had to deal with these issues. There was no real transportation command, so individual company commanders often had to make assignments and other decisions in response to orders from above. Sometime about midnight everyone received orders to send their supply wagons to Bordentown, but to do so very quietly, not an easy job given the wagon construction and moving and rubbing parts that created much noise. Things were made even more difficult by a change in the weather that turned extremely cold and froze the muddy roads to a very hard, slippery surface that jolted the wagons.

General Charles Cornwallis

I am General Charles Cornwallis serving under General William Howe in North America. I commanded the British troops that pursued the rebel army across New Jersey before General Howe decided to establish winter quarters. At that point I was given permission to return to England on leave for the winter to visit my wife, whom I knew was ill. After the rebel victory at Trenton on December 26, my leave was cancelled and I was ordered to gather together at Princeton the elements of the British army in New Jersey cantonments, some 8 to 10,000 troops, and use it to destroy the rebel army that we knew was establishing itself at Trenton.

I arrived at Princeton late on January 1 and ordered my troops to be ready to march on Trenton in the morning. Marching so many men with artillery and baggage wagons was a complex enough operation without the weather changing and a short warming spell turning the dirt road into deep mud. Not only the mud delayed my march, but also enemy ambush sites at the creeks which crossed the road delayed me even further. At one such ambush, I was forced to halt and deploy my forces into line of battle to clear the rebels from their site and this delayed me for well over an hour. After this series of delaying actions, my vanguard arrived at Trenton not long before sunset and by the time my troops had cleared the retreating rebels from the town and made several efforts to cross a bridge over the Assunpink Creek to attack their fortified positions, it was dark and I decided to call off the attack until morning. I believed I had the rebels in a trap and would prevail. While several of my officers felt Washington might try to escape overnight, I made the decision to let him be.

Not long after, I heard reports that the rebels seemed to be breaking camp and moving troops, but I believed they were simply moving troops to reinforce troops guarding two fords up the Assunpink Creek and would try to outflank me in a surprise morning attack. I sent troops to fortify those fords and prevent this. I also expected that these troops could push across the fords in the morning and outflank the rebel forces.

Col. Joseph Reed

I am Colonel Joseph Reed, Adjutant General of the Continental Army and, although more recently a resident of Pennsylvania, a native of Trenton. While General Washington's troops were completing their crossing to Trenton on December 30, I was sent with a patrol of six troopers of the Light Horse of Philadelphia towards Princeton to gather intelligence. I was unable to learn a great deal and was not successful in recruiting a local person to go into Princeton for information due to the terror the British had struck in the people. I decided to scout on the outskirts of town and perhaps get behind the town where there would be fewer guard posts.

While doing this, I came upon a farm where I observed a British soldier "passing from a barn to the dwelling-house without arms." I then saw several additional unarmed men. My patrol charged and surrounded the house, capturing twelve British soldiers, equipped as dragoons, and well-armed. We also captured a commissary officer with them. Instead of being on guard to defend that officer and themselves, they had been working on the much more pleasant business of attacking and conquering a parcel of mince pies.

We brought our prisoners to Trenton and learned that the enemy at Princeton was now about 7000 strong and that they intended to attack Trenton in a few days. Each prisoner was examined separately and each confirmed the situation. It appeared to me, and others, that our army was now in a trap and risked annihilation. The next day, a map of Princeton drawn by a patriot spy fell into the hands of Colonel Cadwalader and was shared with General Washington. It contained important information on the British defenses at Princeton that had recently been put in place by General Leslie.

Gen Hugh Mercer

I am Brigadier General Hugh Mercer of Virginia. I was born in Scotland and took part in the rebellion in 1648 in which we were defeated and I had to leave the country and come to America. I am a doctor by trade and practiced medicine in Fredericksburg, Virginia before the war. I fought under Washington during the 1776 campaign and was especially responsible for the defense of New Jersey while leading a back-up force called the Flying-Camp. I am a close friend of General Washington.

After the combat ended for the day on January 2, General Washington called a council of war at the house of Alexander Douglass which he had designated as his headquarters. He laid out the situation for us and asked for our opinions on what we should do. It may well be that he knew just what he wanted to do next but he took in all opinions before announcing it so that we all felt we were part of the decision. We could not help but think that he only appeared to have put us in an inescapable trap.

The plan we adopted was to leave Trenton as secretly as possible overnight and march by a roundabout route towards Princeton where we could surprise the three regiments General Cornwallis had left there guarding the town and some supplies. From there we could go on and take New Brunswick which was very lightly defended and capture a number of supplies, including the British war chest, and then move on to Morristown in the Watchung Mountains. This would put us on the flank of any British movements in New Jersey and force them to pull back towards New York.

Dr. John Cochran

I am Dr. John Cochran and serving with the Philadelphia Associators along with Dr. Benjamin Rush. Dr. Rush was kind enough to tell people that I was possessed of "humanity as well as skill, and was dear to all who knew me." On January 2, I worked with Dr. Rush and several young men we had with us as students and treated at least 20 men. We worked into the early morning, when exhausted we lay down on some straw in the same room with our patients who cried and groans, some convulsing, while we lay by their side. We slept for only two or three hours.

About 4:00am, I awoke and got up to step outside the house to pull myself together so I could continue helping our wounded. Once outside, I immediately could tell that the army had left. Apparently no one had thought to inform us in our makeshift hospital that the army was leaving to march to Princeton. I quickly awoke Dr. Rush and the others and we knew we had to get our wounded men out of the area. We found wagons and horses, loaded our wounded into them, but did not know just where to take them. We surmised that the army had retreated to Bordentown, so we set off in that direction. We obviously missed the battle of Princeton the next morning and were not there to help the wounded of that battle. Dr. Rush was furious that Washington had not had the presence of mind to realize how important we doctors were to his men and had headed for battle with no medical officers.