



## AN AMERICAN REVOLUTION DIARY

### *Reliving Ten Crucial Days of 1776-77*

**Prelude—December 8-25, 1776:** After punishing defeats in New York and a desperate retreat across New Jersey, General Washington’s freezing men camped on the west bank of the Delaware River, many without tents. Fewer than three thousand when they arrived, more straggled in: nearby militias, then Continentals formerly led by General Charles Lee, captured by the British due to what Washington called “folly and imprudence.” Without a new army, Washington wrote, “the game is pretty near up.” Congress abandoned Philadelphia for Baltimore, calling over its shoulder for new enlistments as it fled. Tories collaborated with British and Hessian forces. General Nathanael Greene called it “the dark part of the night,” adding hopefully, “which is generally just before the day.” The American soldiers shivering on the riverbank largely stood alone.

To raise the spirit of the army, and of the people, Washington had to conjure a victory. The enemy was nestled into winter quarters in widely separated posts in New Jersey. Harassment by militia kept them isolated. At a council of war on December 22, Washington suggested that the ragtag Americans attack across the river. Late that night, the decision was made to chance everything on that single throw of the dice.

Widely read by the soldiers the next day, Tom Paine’s *The American Crisis* appealed to the cause of liberty in “times that try men’s souls.” To anyone who shrank from the fight, Paine declared that their children “will curse his cowardice [when] a little might have saved the whole.” The true course, Paine added, was not to seek peace, but to say, “If there must be trouble, let it be in my day, that my child may have peace.” Brave words could not conceal the peril. For December 24, the commander-in-chief chose the passwords, “Victory or Death.” ~ David O. Stewart, author of *THE SUMMER OF 1787: The Men Who Invented the Constitution*. [www.davidostewart.com](http://www.davidostewart.com)

**Day 1—December 25, 1776: Crossing the Delaware River** - At about 4:30 A.M., as dusk settled into dark, vanguard regiments began to board sixty-five foot Durham boats—some thirty-five men to each of the massive shallow-draft vessels—as sailors from the vaunted 14th Massachusetts Regiment, Colonel John Glover’s “Marbleheaders,” began the

arduous task of transporting about 2,400 men across the frigid Delaware. Philadelphia dock hands managed moving the horses and artillery onto Sam McConkey's flat-bottom ferry boats. By 8:00 P.M. a full-bore nor'easter lashed the region, slowing the operations to a tedious crawl. By 3:30 A.M., the last of the troops would land on the eastern bank of the Delaware. The mission was hours behind schedule, and although the general didn't know it, his carefully laid plans already had gone wrong. The foul weather had stymied the movements of the two patriot columns that were supposed to cross farther to the south. Washington was on his own. Moving from McConkey's Ferry, the small army turned right at Bear Tavern Road and headed toward Trenton, nine miles south. Moving through unrelenting weather, ragged soldiers and straining animals successfully hauled artillery across the steep banks of Jacob's Creek. Soldiers were urged on by their officers, warning them to keep moving or freeze and die—and at least two poor souls were lost on the march. At Birmingham (today's West Trenton) the troops split into parallel columns, one under Nathanael Greene, the other under John Sullivan. Fortune blessed their advance. The wretched weather kept enemy reconnaissance to a minimum; and Colonel Johann Rall, the Hessian commander, misinterpreted a clash between one of his outposts and a rebel advance party. Forewarned of a possible attack, Rall thought any American threat ended with the skirmish and relaxed his security. *Weather conditions were mercilessly cold, 27° with a windchill in the teens. Snow, sleet, and hail hampered the night march.* ~ Mark Edward Lender, author of *CABAL!: The Plot Against General Washington*. [www.markedwardlender.com](http://www.markedwardlender.com)

**Day 2—December 26, 1776: First Battle of Trenton** – As Washington approached Trenton, he was astounded by the valor of his men, who had marched all night and were still eager to attack. Though a snowy tempest still whirled around them, the squalls now blew at their backs as they raced forward at a brisk pace. Intent on exploiting the element of surprise, Washington wanted his men to startle the Hessians. Emerging from the Trenton woods shortly after eight A.M., he divided his wing of the army into three columns and spearheaded the middle column himself, trotting forward in an exposed position. As his men surged ahead, he reported to Hancock, they “seemed to vie with the other in pressing forward.” Washington heard artillery blasts exploding on the River Road, confirming that the two American wings had coordinated their arrival.

Trenton consisted of a hundred or so houses, long since deserted by their occupants. Knox's cannon began to fire with pinpoint accuracy down the two main streets, King and Queen, with Alexander Hamilton again in the thick of the fray. “The hurry, fright, and confusion of the enemy was [not] unlike that which will be when the last trump shall sound,” said Knox, who forced the German gunners to abandon their weapons and scatter to the southern end of town.

Colonel Rall mobilized a group of men in an apple orchard, then tried to steer a charge toward Washington. Responding to this move, Washington adroitly positioned his men on high ground nearby. As John Greenwood recalled, "General Washington, on horseback and alone, came up to our major and said, 'March on, my brave fellows, after me!' and rode off." Washington's quick-witted action stopped the Hessian advance in its tracks. Colonel Rall, who was riddled with bullets, "reeled in the saddle" before being rescued from his horse and carried to a church. Washington conversed with the dying Rall and ordered that all Hessian prisoners be treated honorably. When he learned from Major James Wilkinson of the surrender of the last regiment, he beamed with quiet pleasure. "Major Wilkinson," he replied, shaking his hand, "this is a glorious day for our country." Since he had crafted the strategy and led his men to glory, the stunning victory belonged to Washington lock, stock, and barrel. *The temperature remained around 32° all day.* ~ from Ron Chernow's *GEORGE WASHINGTON: A Life*. All Rights Reserved © 2010 Penguin Press. [www.ronchernow.com](http://www.ronchernow.com)

**Days 3 and 4—December 27-28, 1776:** As at every difficult moment, Washington decided to convene a council of war. On the afternoon of December 27, he informed his adjutant, "I have called a meeting of the general officers," to discuss "what future operations may be necessary." Just before the council met, a courier arrived with unexpected news. It was a message from John Cadwalader, who reported that he had crossed the Delaware River into New Jersey on the second try, early on the morning of the twenty-seventh with 1,800 troops, mostly Associators. He had done so at the urging of his men, who were always determined to make their own choices. Once on the Jersey shore, they demanded that he remain, even to the point of mutiny. They were in Burlington, south of Trenton, and discovered that the enemy were in a "panic" and had gone off "with great precipitation," some of them all the way to Amboy on the east side of the state. Cadwalader saw an opportunity. "If we can drive them from West Jersey," wrote this merchant-turned-soldier, "the success will raise an army by next Spring, & establish the Credit of the Continental Money." Here was an unexpected way of turning victory into a larger triumph. . . . "The central question was settled: One victory was not enough. The army should seize the moment and attack again very quickly with all its strength. . . . Having made that decision, Washington resolved to commit all of his resources to the enterprise. Early the next morning, December 28, 1776, gallopers went from his headquarters to generals in the field. *It snowed up to six inches in the morning; the temperature was at 28° and dropped into the 20's that night.* ~ From David Hackett Fischer's *WASHINGTON'S CROSSING*. All Rights Reserved © 2004 Oxford University Press.

**Days 5 and 6—December 29–30, 1776:** General Washington faced two major problems when finally deciding to move his victorious Continentals back across the Delaware River from their temporary campsite in Newtown, Pennsylvania. Justifiably, he felt obligated to support the force of 1,500 Pennsylvania militiamen that Colonel John Cadwalader had finally gotten across the river on the 27th and was now searching for the retreating Hessians south of Trenton. Further, Washington knew he had to keep his own force active, even with little time to rest, largely because so many of his Continentals were ready to break camp and go home after their enlistments ended on January 1. Amid bitterly cold weather and up to six inches of fresh snow on the ground, the movement to re-cross the river into New Jersey largely took place on December 29 and 30. Once back in the Trenton area, Washington collected most of his bedraggled troops just below the town along the south side of Assunpink Creek on Mill Hill. His hope was that thoughts of again facing the hated British/Hessian enemy would animate his Continentals to extend their enlistments for six more weeks. Late on the 30th, Washington tried to rally a New England regiment to keep standing with the cause of liberty. Such intense persuading, virtual begging on his part, continued with other regiments, all the way to the New Year. More than half reluctantly accepted Washington's pleas along with a promised bonus of ten dollars for extending their term of service. All told, Washington would have about 6,000 Continentals and militiamen in position to face combat with the enemy troops, now beginning to bivouac about ten miles to the north in Princeton, once the New Year 1777 began. *The temperature remained below freezing both days.*  
~James Kirby Martin, author of *BENEDICT ARNOLD, REVOLUTIONARY HERO: An American Warrior Reconsidered.*

**Days 7 and 8—December 31, 1776–January 1, 1777:** On December 31, 1776, with temperatures in the 30s, Washington completed his efforts of the past several days to convince his Continentals to extend their one-year enlistments, which ended that day, for an additional six weeks. He had troops at Trenton and also at several other locations, including Crosswicks, so other officers had to help with this effort. On January 1, his army then consisted of the remaining veteran Continentals who had extended and also a large number of militia, especially from Pennsylvania, with much less combat experience. Washington's scouts obtained evidence that Lord Cornwallis expected to consolidate about 8,000 British and Hessian troops at Princeton and then make an attack on Trenton. Washington also obtained a sketch map, known as the spy map, showing British positions at Princeton and a little-used back road that could give him unopposed access to the town.

Planning to entice Cornwallis to attack him at Trenton, Washington established his troops and a large number of artillery pieces on Mill Hill, opposite the main town of Trenton across the Assunpink Creek. This gave him the high ground advantage and the

creek as a defensive moat with only one bridge to defend. To delay the battle at Trenton itself until late in the day, he sent about 1,000 troops toward Princeton on the main road to set up defensive ambush positions at several creek crossings and ordered the troops to delay the British to give him time to prepare and then fight the main battle late in the day. Advance squads of British and Americans at points near Princeton skirmished briefly. Towards the end of the day on January 1, the temperature climbed into the low 50s, and Washington planned to bring all his troops to Trenton overnight ready to face Cornwallis the next day. ~ William L. Kidder, author of *TEN CRUCIAL DAYS: Washington's Vision for Victory Unfolds*. [www.wlkidderhistorian.com](http://www.wlkidderhistorian.com)

**Day 9—January 2, 1777: Battle of Assunpink Creek (Second Trenton)** - In the early morning hours, General Charles Cornwallis marched from Princeton with about 8,000 British and Hessian troops, intending to crush Washington's ragtag army and the rebellion. Washington had positioned his forces on Mill Hill south of Assunpink Creek. Experienced Continental Army units led by Colonel Edward Hand of the 1st Pennsylvania Regiment, totaling about 1,000 men, fought a series of delaying actions in Maidenhead (Lawrenceville today) and the outskirts of Trenton from late morning until near dusk. Aided by muddy roads resulting from overnight rain and unusually warm temperatures, the rebel skirmishers slowed Cornwallis's march long enough to prevent a full-scale, coordinated assault in daylight against Washington's army. The latter comprised almost 7,000 men, but many of them were untested militia. The opposing armies at the creek engaged in a fierce artillery duel, and the Continental soldiers and militia beat back a series of probing attacks in the area of the stone bridge as darkness descended on the battlefield. Thinking he had Washington trapped against the Delaware, Cornwallis broke off his attack until morning.

This was the only engagement of the "Ten Crucial Days" in which Washington's army fought British and Hessian troops in the same action, was outnumbered by the enemy, and faced soldiers commanded by a British general. Colonel Hand's delaying action and the Battle of Assunpink Creek together made for the longest battle of the "Ten Crucial Days" and the one involving the largest number of soldiers. On this day, the Crown's forces suffered casualties that exceed American losses by more than three-to-one. As darkness settled in, Washington called a council of war. Recognizing their precarious position, he and his generals devised a daring plan to march north overnight and attack the British garrison in Princeton. ~ David Price, author of *THE ROAD TO ASSUNPINK CREEK: Liberty's Desperate Hour and the Ten Crucial Days of the American Revolution*. [www.tinyurl.com/y2gu3bxn](http://www.tinyurl.com/y2gu3bxn)

**Day 10—January 3, 1777: Battle of Princeton** - With campfires burning on Mill Hill, Washington sent his baggage south and began the twelve-mile overnight march north to Princeton

with about 6,000 men, mostly untested Pennsylvania militia in freezing weather. Just south of town, on the Quaker farms of William Clarke and his brother Thomas, the Continentals encountered a column of British regulars commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Charles Mawhood marching south to reinforce Cornwallis. Almost simultaneously, the opposing forces deployed and the battle was joined. Virginia General Hugh Mercer led about 350 Virginians and Pennsylvanians against Mawhood's 17th Regiment of Foot. After a ferocious bayonet attack, Mercer lay mortally wounded on the field and his troops retreated, giving the redcoats an early advantage. Washington rallied retreating Continental and militia units and personally led the counterattack that drove the enemy from the field. The larger American force then attacked and defeated the remnant British garrison in Princeton proper. When Cornwallis in Trenton heard the artillery fire in the distance, he countermarched his superior force back toward Princeton to give battle, but it was too late. Only one hour prior to the arrival of Cornwallis's advance units, Washington and his Continental Army had marched north along the Millstone River toward Morristown, New Jersey. *Temperatures remained in the twenties all day.* ~ Glenn Williams, author of *DUNMORE'S WAR: The Last Conflict of America's Colonial Era* and Senior Historian, U.S. Army Center of Military History.

**Postscript—January 3-6, 1777:** The British high command initially acknowledged losses for the day of 276 men; as more reports filtered in, the tally eventually grew to 450, or a third of the Princeton garrison. About half had been killed or wounded; the other half were headed to jails in Connecticut or Pennsylvania. American casualties, although imprecisely recorded, likely numbered 60 to 70, about half of them killed. Several dozen dead, British and American, were subsequently buried in a stone quarry. Others were interred, an American major reported, "by hauling them on sleds to great holes and heaping them in." Few went to their graves with the dignity of Colonel Haslet, laid in the yard of the Old Presbyterian Meeting House in Philadelphia with a sixteen stanza elegy reciting his virtue. . . .

At dusk on Friday, Cornwallis led his column onto the road north from Princeton. Fearing that Washington would pillage the New Brunswick cantonment before he could get there, he abandoned some of his sick and wounded, as well as much baggage. With provisions gone, the army battered, and enemies lurking in every glade, New Jersey no longer seemed secure, much less hospitable. The fifteen-mile journey would take sixteen hours, slowed by disheartened men, knackered horses, and the wrecked bridge at Kingston. "I never experienced such a disagreeable night's march in my life," wrote Lieutenant Martin Hunter. . . .

The American army scuffled into Morristown at sunset on Monday, January 6, three days after leaving Princeton. Captain (Charles Willson) Peale noted that his men had “feet covered with ice,” and other commanders pleaded for mittens, blankets, and shoes. The Philadelphia Council of Safety had instead sent twenty hogsheads of rum. Blacksmiths repaired wagons and shod horses, armorers fixed dilapidated firelocks, and filthy, smoke-stained men washed themselves and their tattered raiments. For the first time in months, they felt secure enough to breathe deep and sleep well. “Our late success has given our troops great spirits and [they] seem determined to endure every hardship like good soldiers,” Captain Nathan Peters wrote his wife, Lois, who was still tending their saddlery in Massachusetts, as she had since Lexington. A chaplain wrote, “How sudden the transition from darkness to light, from grief to joy.”~ **From Rick Atkinson’s *THE BRITISH ARE COMING: The War for America, Lexington to Princeton, 1775-1777*. Used with the permission of the author. All Rights Reserved © 2019 Henry Holt and Co. [www.revolutiontrilogy.com](http://www.revolutiontrilogy.com)**

