



TEN CRUCIAL DAYS
Washington's Vision for Victory Unfolds
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Saturday, December 28, 1776

Word of the battle at Trenton had still not travelled far. In Newport, Rhode Island, the day began with a “gentle frost” and “a scanty allowance” of two bushels of coal was issued for each barrack room. Lieutenant Peebles noted that not enough firewood to keep the troops warm had been provided, with the result that “the old houses & fences suffer.” That evening, Peebles was part of about a dozen regimental officers who formed a club to dine together on Wednesdays and “play cards & sup” on Saturday evenings. Peebles was not sure the arrangement would last long because, even though they had not yet heard about the action at Trenton, he “still believed that we shall go to New York soon.”¹ Lieutenant Mackenzie continued his interest in rebel boats that came ashore not knowing the British were now in control of the area. Because the American privateer *Alfred* and her prizes were expected to come into the harbor very soon, “orders have been given to hoist the rebel colours upon the appearance of any vessels. The ships in the harbour have struck their colours, and the commodores their broad pendants.” These simple actions would add to the misplaced confidence of approaching American ships.²

IN NEW YORK CITY the morning was very cold and dull and it began to snow about noon. In consequence of Donop’s retreat from Burlington, the artillery earmarked to defend it against the river gondolas was now ordered to remain at Amboy.³ Howe ordered that a picket from each regiment in New York was to make rounds at night and be ready to turn out on the shortest notice. His soldiers must have better appreciated the order that, “Spruce beer will be issued to the troops at Mr. Horsfields Brewery near Maiden Lane from 10 in the morning, to 4 in the afternoon, at the rate of 4 shill[ing]s per barrel of 30 gallons.”⁴

Captain Bamford heard largely inaccurate information about the action at Trenton, including that Washington had attacked with a force of about 7,000 men. Already, Colonel Rall was being blamed and Bamford recorded that Rall, “by some misconduct suffer’d himself to be nearly

surrounded, without making any disposition for securing his retreat," and had lost about 100 killed and wounded and more than 700 taken prisoner, while between 400 and 500 escaped to Colonel Donop's post. The rebels also captured six cannon and 15 colours. Bamford heard Hessian officers say that Rall's death was "a lucky circumstance for him, for had he liv'd he must have been broke with infamy. At least."⁵

IN PHILADELPHIA, CHRISTOPHER MARSHALL went to the Council of Safety to arrange for wood to be supplied to the wives of the militia Associators who had gone to camp. The news of the victory at Trenton was confirmed and he learned that the Pennsylvania militia had crossed over to the Jerseys the day before and the Hessian prisoners at Newtown were expected in town the next day. In the morning, Captain Proctor's artillery company with two cannon, ammunition, and baggage left the city for headquarters, as did hundreds of militia from the country. Marshall wrote in his diary that, "It's said three thousand went for camp yesterday, headed by Gen. Putnam, all in high spirits and warm clothing."⁶ Enthusiasm to support the war effort was clearly improved, virtually overnight.

The Executive Committee of Congress (Robert Morris, George Walton, and George Clymer) wrote to John Hancock that Cadwalader had informed General Putnam that the enemy was panic stricken and they hoped that "our troops will follow them up & not give them time to recover."⁷ The Committee then wrote to Washington expressing their sincere joy "in your Excellencys success at Trentown as we conceive it will have the most important publick consequences and because we think it will do justice in some degree to a character we admire & which we have long wished to appear in the world with that brilliancy that success always obtains & which the members of Congress know you deserve." They had stood by Washington when others expressed doubt about his abilities and now expressed their hope that his success "is only the beginning of

more important advantages" for the American cause. They believed it very likely, that the enemy troops "are seized with a panic whilst your forces are flushed with success and such precious moments shou'd not be lost." Immediately following up with further attacks, before the enemy has time to recover from its surprise, should result in "clearing the Jerseys of them." Continuing to put offensive pressure on the enemy would make it, "probable that those troops whose times of enlistment are now expiring will follow their successful General altho they wou'd have left him whilst acting a defensive part." Large bodies of Associators were already marching to Washington's assistance, and although they had been "put in motion when our affairs were at the worst ... you have given a spring to the tardy spirits & we think their numbers will be greatly augmented." Other reinforcements were expected at camp daily, including Colonel Flemings 9th Virginia Regiment, as well as Pennsylvania Continentals raised in the back counties and additional regiments from Maryland and Virginia.

Regarding the soon to expire Continental enlistments, the Committee advised Washington that if any of the seamen in the two New England regiments should "obstinately persist in being discharged from your service on New Years day we think it adviseable to prevail on them to come down here [to Philadelphia] & assist in getting the frigates out." Congress was anxious to get these ships out to sea, but needed crewmen. The Marblehead regiment that had worked so hard during the crossing on the night of the 25th had volunteered even before the crossing to sail the Continental frigates to a New England port on their way home when their enlistments were up. Washington had not taken them up on the offer, hoping to reenlist them in the army or enlist them into the permanent crews for the frigates.⁸ Now, he would take what he could get from them. Regarding the Hessian prisoners, the Committee did not think they should be exchanged, but that Washington should separate the officers from their men and take advantage of the "favourable opportunity of making them acquainted with the situation & circumstances" of

German immigrants in eastern Pennsylvania “who came here without a farthing of property & have by care & industry acquired plentiful fortunes which they have enjoyed in perfect peace & tranquility until invaders have thought proper to disturb & destroy those possessions.”⁹ Instead of looking at the Hessians as vile mercenaries, Revolution leaders were now beginning to see them as facilitators of Hessian desertions and even potentially productive American citizens.¹⁰

Congress was hoping to be able to return to Philadelphia if Washington could drive the British further back towards New York. North Carolina delegate William Hooper wrote to Robert Morris that he wished the Congress could return to Philadelphia without any fear of having to flee again. For one reason, Baltimore was increasingly uncomfortable for the delegates and in general was a “dirty, boggy hole [that] beggars all description.” Except when the streets were frozen hard, the delegates had to ride on horseback to get to Congress, because the roads were “so miry that carriages almost stall on the sides of them. When the Devil proffered our Saviour the Kingdoms of the World, he surely placed his thumb on this delectable spot & reserved it to himself for his own peculiar chosen seat and inheritance.” As for the people of Baltimore, “the congress can boast no acquaintance with them but what arises from their daily exorbitant claims upon our pockets.”¹¹

The December 28 edition of the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* published portions of a letter reportedly from “an officer of distinction at Newtown, Bucks County, dated December 27, 1776 that gave a generally accurate, morale raising, description of the battle and capture of the Hessians. Other news items and advertisements provided old news from London and news from a few days to a few months old from various other places. Aside from some comments about British atrocities and the need for men to step up and support the cause, there was nothing to indicate that Philadelphia felt threatened with attack.¹²

GENERAL GRANT AT BRUNSWICK ordered Donop to have his troops take post at Princeton and, still downplaying the quality of his enemy, told him that should the American forces “make an attempt upon your cantonments ... those rebel gentlemen will have reason to repent it.”¹³ General Howe wrote to Grant about Trenton stating, “It has been a most wretched business. Much misconduct on the part of Rall according to some particulars that have been reported.” He ordered the Light Dragoons at Princeton to rejoin Leslie, and Grant and Leslie must decide whether Donop’s brigade and Rall’s surviving troops would be enough to garrison Princeton. Howe did not want to have any British troops at Princeton if it could be avoided, just Hessians and Scots. At least for the present, this was now the left wing of the line of cantonments. Not aware yet of Donop’s panicky retreat, he said Donop’s troops from Bordentown should be moved up quickly and the Hessian 4th Battalion of grenadiers marched to Princeton. He gave Grant permission to make any alterations in the plan he deemed “most proper & efficient” and, to avoid two of Rall’s mistakes, instructed him to create breastworks in the streets of Princeton and take all necessary precautions for defense, including plans for units to support each other in case of attack. Because there were American militia and new Continental regiments being formed in cantonment at Morristown, he might send a battalion of the 71st Regiment from Newark to Springfield to keep an eye on them. Howe closed by wishing Grant, “Merry Christmas to you notwithstanding all our disasters.”¹⁴

Daily routine orders to the 17th Regiment at Hillsborough included that there would be the usual wood cutting party and the trees were to be cut close to the ground. The officer commanding the work party would be answerable if the men left their work to go to houses of the local people. Sentries were to be posted “towards the enemy who are to prevent the soldiers pass.” General Grant presented “a pipe of Madeira wine to the officers” to make up for his order that no officer could have a leave of absence at present. Two days of forage for the horses would

be issued tomorrow at the usual place and four days of flour for the men would be issued when the quartermaster sergeants return. Regimental officers should submit returns of camp equipment and arms needed by their officers and men for the upcoming campaign.¹⁵

The remnants of the three Rall regiments had been temporarily commanded by Captain Bocking, but now Captain Emanuel von Wilmousky of the Lossberg grenadier company was put in command. The makeshift regiment headed for Princeton where they quartered in town "and in the neighbourhood as comfortably as circumstances permitted, but it was bad enough." Captain Ewald marched his jägers to Kingston, "a village consisting of about sixty to seventy houses of which only one was inhabited," occupied the town, and patrolled the routes to Rocky Hill, Trenton, and Cranbury.¹⁶

TEMPERATURES WERE BELOW freezing in the Trenton area and there was a bit of snow when some Americans returned to the town.¹⁷ Colonel Joseph Reed, with Lieutenant Colonel John Cox and Major Joseph Cowperthwaite, arrived about 2:00am. Reed found the town evacuated by the British, with things "in a still more wretched condition" than Bordentown. He wrote to Washington "urging him to cross the river again & pursue the advantages which Providence had presented." Strangely, he didn't mention the paroled wounded Hessian soldiers left in town and medical officer Oliva taking care of them. Private Kurt Mensing of the Lossberg Regiment died from his wounds that day.¹⁸ Reed felt there was a real possibility of catching up with Donop before he reached Princeton or Brunswick and when two parties of light troops requested by Reed marched into Trenton about 2:00pm he directed them to pursue Donop's brigade. He wanted them to harass the Hessian rearguard, and stop them if possible until other American units could join them.¹⁹

THE AMERICAN TROOPS THAT had crossed into south Jersey were acting to assess any enemy presence. Lieutenant Charles Willson Peale received orders to march at 4:00am and his battalion set off just after daybreak. They had marched about four miles when a party was detached to pursue two Hessians reported in the area. They halted after six miles when word was received that the enemy was just two and a half miles from them and advancing. Half of the Second Battalion, including Peale's company, was ordered back to a crossroad, where they halted for a short time until ordered to rejoin the battalion, which they caught up with at Bordentown.

Peale's company quartered at a house recently occupied by enemy troops that needed cleaning. He left some men to clean and then took a walk and came across a storehouse marked "King's Stores" and got some beef and pork. When he heard about some flour being available, he got a barrel and delivered some to Captain Boyd. Taking some of the flour himself, he asked a family "to let a negro girl make up some bread for us," but the woman of the family said she would make bread for them and bake it in her oven. She was very kind to them because she was a Whig who had found it necessary to be hypocritical and act the Loyalist while the British troops were there. They were not given time to enjoy their cleaned rooms, but were ordered to march and set out about dusk, without their flour since they had no wagons. The ground was very slippery and Peale took a fall that broke the stock of his musket.

They made it the four miles to Crosswicks about bedtime, but Peale noted, "no bed for us, who think ourselves happy to get a plank by the fire." Fortunately, they found quarters with a Mr. Cooke who "made us very welcome." Mr. Cooke had been subject to Hessian plundering and for clothing was left with only the shirt on his back. Peale noted the large extent of plundering, saying of the Hessians that "they have taken hogs, sheep, horses and cows, everywhere; even children have been stripped of their clothes - in which business the Hessian women were the most active - in short, the abuse of the inhabitants is beyond description."²⁰

Captain Thomas Rodney left Burlington about 4:00am and marched his company on the Great Road to Bordentown. He recorded, "Along the road we saw many Hessian posts at bridges and cross roads; they were chiefly made with rails and covered with straw, all deserted. The whole country as we passed appeared one scene of devastation and ruin. Neither hay, straw, grain, or any live stock or poultry to be seen." About 9:00am they halted at the foot of a bridge about half a mile from Bordentown and heard the enemy had deserted the town, were about five miles away, would probably return, and some light horse were expected any minute. They took post in a cornfield and set sentry posts on all the roads, waiting for about an hour before learning that the enemy were retreating rapidly rather than attacking. They then marched into town and took possession of the stores the enemy had left behind, went into quarters, refreshed themselves, and were joined by the main body of the army about two hours later.

Rodney described Bordentown as "pleasantly situated on the River Delaware about 10 miles above Burlington, the houses are chiefly brick, and several of them large elegant and neat, but they all look like barns and stables, full of hay, straw, dirt and nastiness, and everything valuable about them destroyed and carried off, and all the inhabitants fled." This had been Colonel Donop's headquarters, but Rodney thought "it looked more like the headquarters of a swine herd." Also, "Mr. Bordens house had some hundred pounds worth of goods, and valuable furniture ruined and broken to pieces."

Cadwalader was informed in the afternoon that enemy troops were at Allentown eight miles away. About dusk the light troops pushed forward followed by two battalions and they soon reached Crosswicks, about four miles away, described by Rodney as a little town of "all wooden houses built at the crossing of several roads." Here they learned that the enemy had left Allentown and gone to "a place called Hide town" about eight miles further away. Some officers wanted their troops to make a forced march that night to intercept them, but they "had then been

on duty four days and nights, making forced marches without six hours sleep in the whole time.” The company officers “unanimously declared it was madness to attempt it; for it would use up all our brave men, not one of whom had yet given out but all were dreadfully fatigued. However, a few riflemen and fresh men were sent off, and the light troops were to reinforce them in the morning.” Taking advantage of the opportunity to get some rest, the men took up “comfortable quarters, and something refreshing to eat and drink, and several prisoners were picked up in the neighborhood that night, one of them a member of the Kings foot guard, a very tall, likely fellow, said that he had been sent on Christmas day from Brunswick to Mount Holly with orders for the troops to retreat.”²¹

Sergeant William Young’s company loaded their baggage onto a wagon and marched to Bristol where it was unloaded, put on board a “flat bottomed boat,” and in spite of the ice taken across the river. Margaret Morris at Burlington noted that early in the morning the “troops marched out of town in high spirits,” while snow in the morning “drove the gondolas again down the river.” Knowing that the soldiers coming through town would soon be engaged in battle, she was saddened that a number would be killed. Sergeant Young’s company got to Colonel Cox’s house at Burlington before dark and as soon as the baggage was stored they foraged for firewood, “made a good fire. Got supper, went to sleep.” The weather cleared in the afternoon and Margaret Morris, who lived next door to Cox, “observed several boats with soldiers and their baggage making up to our wharf.” Then, “a man, who seemed to have command over the soldiers just landed, civilly asked for the keys to Colonel Cox’s house, in which they stored their baggage and took up their quarters for the night, and were very quiet.” She also sent them two mince pies which Young accepted gratefully and prayed, “May God Bless all our friends and benefactors.” Margaret was surprised that one of the soldiers was her brother-in-law, George Dillwyn. “When I saw the companions he was among, I thought of what Solomon said of his beloved, that she was

like an apple tree amongst the trees of the wood. When he came into the house, my kindred heart bade him welcome to the hospital roof – for so must I ever deem that roof which has sheltered me and my little flock – though our joy at meeting him was checked by the prospect before us and around.”²²

Rhode Island Sergeant John Smith’s company rose in the morning and ate some beef roasted on their fire coals. They marched for Bordentown and it began to snow “a little modratly,” so that “the traviling was slipry & sharp to our feet.” They got to within two or three miles of Bordentown and halted, hearing that some enemy light horse was nearby. They built fires to warm themselves and then it snowed. After two hours they went into town where they “stayed in the street for some time until we had houses provided for us to quarter in.” One of their scouts took a Hessian prisoner and killed another near town. This Hessian had fired on the scout, but did no damage. In Bordentown they found twelve sick and wounded Hessians that had been left behind at one house and found provisions that had been left in almost every house. The Hessians also left provisions in storehouses and a waggon in the road “with a hogshed of rum & port.” They received orders to take up flour and meat wherever found and cook up a three day supply during the night. Sergeant Smith’s company were packed into a “verey small roome” all night, where they cooked. ²³

BACK IN PENNSYLVANIA AT Newtown, Lieutenant Wiederholdt met and spoke with General Washington who asked him questions about the action at Trenton. Wiederholdt gave his opinion that their failure had been caused by the faulty disposition of the Hessian troops about the town. He also listed other mistakes made by Rall and how he would have avoided them. Washington praised him for his vigilance and the defiance he had shown with the few men he had at his outpost when the battle began. Wiederholdt found Washington to be polite, refined, and

reserved, a man of few words, and that he resembled in appearance Captain von Biesenrodt of the Knyphausen regiment. Washington gave Wiederholdt permission to return briefly to Trenton on parole, in order to search for some possessions he had left behind.²⁴

Lieutenant Piel noted, "This morning we visited General Lord Stirling, who conducted himself in a very friendly manner toward us. He received us with these words, 'Your General von Heister treated me like a brother when I was a prisoner [captured at the Battle of Long Island], and so, Gentlemen, you shall be treated by me in the same manner.'" After they sat down, "a tall, thin, sad man entered, whom we assumed to be the local pastor, and who directed a long speech at us, in which he sought to convince us of the correct view of the Americans in this war." Piel noted this pastor "scolded" the Hessian officers "so miserably that we finally tired of his idle talk and told him we had not been sent to America to determine which of the parties was in the right, but to fight for the King." Stirling rescued them from the pastor and asked them to accompany him to see Washington, who received them "very politely," but spoke to them only in English. Piel wrote that, "In the face of this man nothing of the great man showed for which he would be noted. His eyes have no fire, but a slight smile in his expression when he spoke inspired love and respect." He kept four of the officers, no doubt including Wiederholdt, for the noon meal while the rest ate with Lord Stirling.²⁵

Lord Stirling, on behalf of Washington, and with a lame hand, wrote to New Jersey Governor Livingston from Newtown reporting that they had captured or killed at least 1200 of the "best of Hessian troops, with their artillery and stores." He exclaimed, "the effect is amazing" and the enemy troops had left Bordentown, Black Horse, Burlington, and Mount Holly to head across the State toward South Amboy and we are now in possession of all those places they abandoned. He asked Livingston to have the militia form small scout parties and harass the Hessian camps and line of march on their retreat. He advised, "now is the time to exert every move and if we do;

General Howe's army will be ruined." The prospect of more attacks by Washington on British cantonments with the goal of forcing the enemy troops from the State was very invigorating. The state had been aroused and it was important that the legislature resume business immediately. The Assembly had been called to meet the next Thursday and he hoped the governor and council could be there also to complete the government. Stirling hoped that "we shall soon be in full possession of New Jersey" to raise morale even further. Efforts must be increased to raise the new Continental regiments because, as things now stand, "no man of spirit will serve." Men needed encouragement to enlist and problems with officer appointments need to be solved so officers could begin recruiting. To encourage officers to accept commissions, it would be important to "let merit in service & not dirty connections" determine appointments and advancement. Suffering from the ill effects of fighting in the cold, snowy weather, Stirling hoped to be well enough soon to help give the enemy another drubbing. He proudly recalled, "I had the honor to make two regiments of them surrender prisoners of war [at Trenton] and so treat them in such a stile as will make the rest of them more willing to surrender than to fight."²⁶

Washington received erroneous intelligence that Donop's troops had retreated rapidly towards South Amboy, in actuality Princeton, immediately after hearing of the attack on Trenton. General Mifflin was ready to follow Cadwalader and Ewing and cross the river to New Jersey to pursue them. Washington planned to cross himself as soon as his men were refreshed and recovered from the fatigue of the past few days and with these combined troops he would have a respectable force in New Jersey to make further attacks against British posts. He called on Continental Generals McDougall and William Maxwell at Morristown, and the New Jersey militia in general, to make harassing attacks on the British flanks and rear. To encourage a larger militia turnout, Washington ordered the men to be informed that he planned to "rescue their country from the hands of the enemy" that had been plundering their homes and farms and

mistreating their women. Washington wanted all available troops to be prepared to join up with him to create "a fair opportunity ... of driving the enemy entirely from, or at least to, the extremity of the province of Jersey."²⁷

TWO DAYS AFTER TAKING the Hessians at Trenton, Washington was still resting his troops and planning an offensive. Sergeant McCarty was in the Bucks County woods with no shelter from the snow, sleet, and rain on both the 27th and 28th. He felt that, "my time was not yet come, bless His name, or I should have been frozen."²⁸ Private David How of Sargent's regiment spent the day washing his "things."²⁹ Having just arrived at Newtown the day before, busy doctor William Shippen set off to fix up another hospital and left Washington whom he knew was "preparing for another expedition in ye Jerseys."³⁰ Washington would only have most of his veteran troops for three more days. While he certainly appreciated the militiamen who were joining him and whose enthusiasm would help greatly, they were not seasoned veterans. He desperately wanted to re-occupy the Jerseys, but how would he do that in three days? The bulk of his experienced men were still recuperating in Bucks County.