

*Let it be told to the future world, that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet and to repulse it.*

— Thomas Paine, from *The American Crisis*, Number I, December 19, 1776

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# THE DESPERATE HOUR

As the vanguard of His Majesty's forces moved through Trenton toward the Assunpink Creek at day's end on January 2, Washington and his troops could easily discern the immediacy and gravity of the threat looming before them. The defenders were united in the intensity of the moment and their physical proximity to each other.

These men later spoke of their leader's "composure" at this critical time and how they rallied to "his quiet leadership." Many of them would be physically near the commander-in-chief in the course of the upcoming battle and even speak with him. "They felt that they were one with him and were inspired by his example," according to David Hackett Fischer, who noted that their feelings for the general included "not only trust and loyalty but also confidence and complete approval."<sup>1</sup> As the American soldiers above the creek

retreated across the bridge, Washington directed them to defensive positions that conformed to his battle plan.

The Americans had before them a natural barrier against the king's troops. The stream was running "high and swift" after the recent rain and melting snow, and Henry Knox reported that it "could be crossed only at a few points."<sup>2</sup> The bridge over the creek "was an arched span made of stone and barely wide enough for the passage of a horse and carriage." On the east side of the bridge, the Assunpink formed an extensive millpond, and to the west it ran its course for about a quarter of a mile to the Delaware River.<sup>3</sup>

As the oncoming British and Hessian attackers pushed their way in his direction, Washington calmly eyed their movements from behind the stone overpass. Private John Howland of Rhode Island remembered that the "noble horse of General Washington stood with his breast pressed close against the end of the west rail of the bridge, and the firm, composed, and majestic countenance of the General inspired confidence and assurance in a moment so important and critical." Howland proudly noted that it was his good fortune "to be next to the west rail and, arriving at the end of the bridge rail," he "pressed against the shoulder of the General's horse and in contact with the boot of the General." He observed that the "horse stood as firm as the rider, and seemed to understand that he must not quit his post and station."<sup>4</sup>

Knowing how consequential the stakes were in the upcoming fight, Washington had configured the defensive alignment of the Continental units and supporting militia near the creek with extreme care. They were spread out for nearly three miles along the southern bank of the Assunpink, which Washington called "Mill Creek." Their left stretched to the mouth of the creek at the Delaware River. Further to the east, the rebel troops "had thrown up a series of small earthworks on the ridge and across the road below the Queen street bridge." Behind this front line of battle, the commanding general placed his reserve units.

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General Mercer's brigade was located on the extreme right of the army, two miles above the bridge to the east, and would thereby avoid the brunt of the impending action. The Philadelphia Associators under Colonel Cadwalader, equipped with five cannons, were initially stationed in a field on the right about a mile from the town; however, as the enemy assault unfolded, they would be repositioned closer to the bridge on Washington's orders in order to reinforce the defenders at that most critical point.<sup>5</sup>

In attempting to safeguard such an extended position against the veteran European troops approaching the creek, Washington needed to focus primarily on the three most feasible crossing points. These included: a lower ford on his left near the Delaware; "the sturdy stone bridge, strong but very narrow" in the center of his alignment; and the upper fords, one at Philips's Mill that was "easily passable that day" and the other at Henry's Mill, which was "reported so deep and swift that it was barely usable for horses and nearly impassable for all but strong swimmers."<sup>6</sup>

Washington assigned the most experienced Continental Army units to guard these crossing points. Colonel Hitchcock's Rhode Island brigade was to protect the lower ford on the left. General St. Clair's New England brigade was posted on the high bank just east of the bridge, from where those men were to defend the army's position on the right, especially at Philips's Ford. The three Virginia regiments under Colonel Scott would be front and center, immediately behind the bridge, with two militia units posted on either side of the Virginians—General Ewing's Pennsylvanians on their left and Colonel Silas Newcomb's New Jerseyans to their right. The militia were purposely interspersed between the Continentals. Behind Scott's Virginians, Washington placed the deadliest sharpshooters in his army—Colonel Hand's Pennsylvania riflemen—along with Colonel Haussegger's German Regiment. And behind this second line of defense were more Pennsylvania troops under General Mifflin.

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The bridge was where the fiercest fighting was likely to occur, given its status as the only span across the creek in the area of contention between the two armies. The Virginians whom Washington had posted directly behind it knew they would be severely tested in the coming attack.

In Charles Scott, the colonel of the 5th Virginia Regiment who had fought with Colonel Hand's riflemen along the Princeton Road for much of the day, Washington had "a rough diamond from the Virginia frontier with little schooling and less polish." The men in Scott's regiment referred to him as "Charley." Reputed to be "the most profane and disorderly" soldiers in the army, they were also "hard and tough and fought tenaciously." Scott "led from the front and was tougher and more profane than his men."<sup>7</sup> From their long acquaintance dating back to the French and Indian War, the colonel was in the habit of "affectionately" referring to his commander-in-chief as "the old boss," and his use of that title delighted his unpolished soldiers.<sup>8</sup> This plain-spoken frontiersman "could take pride in his family heritage," as his ancestors had been living in Virginia since the mid-17th century.<sup>9</sup>

Ensign Robert Beale of the 5th Virginia reported that the brigade led by Scott, which comprised Beale's regiment plus the 4th and 6th Virginia Regiments, "was ordered to form in column at the bridge and George Washington came and, in the presence of us all, told Colonel Scott to defend the bridge to the last extremity." And he noted the colonel's response, punctuated by an "oath"—"Yes, General, as long as there is a man alive."<sup>10</sup>

As the soldiers in his brigade awaited the approaching enemy, Scott offered some words of encouragement and practical advice:

Well boys, you know the old boss has put us here to defend this bridge; and by God it must be done, let what will come.

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Now I want to tell you one thing. You're all in the habit of shooting too high. You waste your powder and lead, and I have cursed you about it a hundred times. Now I tell you what it is, nothing must be wasted, every crack must count. For that reason boys, whenever you see them fellows first begin to put their feet upon this bridge do you shin 'em. Take care now and fire low. Bring down your pieces, fire at their legs, one man Wounded in the leg is better [than] a dead one for it takes two more to carry him off and there is three gone. Leg them dam 'em I say leg them.<sup>11</sup>

Washington had placed the regiments under Scott at the bridge because he knew them better than any other in the army. He knew where they came from, his native Virginia; he knew the caliber of their leader, Colonel Scott, from their time together in the last war; and he knew from experience that he had no better fighting men to deploy on this most vital ground. When the commander-in-chief told one of the Virginians, Captain Richard Parker, that they must defend the bridge “to the last extremity,” Parker responded that they intended “to sleep on it.”<sup>12</sup> In short, Washington chose the toughest men he had to defend the toughest spot on the field, and it proved an astute decision—perhaps as much as any he made throughout the war.

Scott's brigade would “be tested by professional European soldiers who ranked among the best that the Old World could send against the New,” but Washington “knew the temper of his fellow Virginians and had good reason to repose such confidence in these soldiers.” Indeed, he “paid them the highest compliment possible by positioning them directly behind the bridge as the Continentals' first line of defense, knowing that they would do as he had ordered, whatever the consequences.”<sup>13</sup>

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At this point, the size of the American army along the creek was almost three times as large as the one that had assaulted Trenton

on December 26.<sup>14</sup> Although this force totaled about 7,000 men, the reserves that Washington was counting on to support the Continental soldiers against the approaching attackers were militia units with little if any combat experience. They had left behind the relative comforts of civilian life to face enemy troops who had made a career of soldiering and in many cases had extensive battlefield experience in European wars.

The militia in America embodied a concept of citizen soldier that had existed for generations. Ever since the earliest settlements, the colonists had been compelled to provide for their own defense against hostile natives and European adversaries. With few exceptions, every able-bodied adult male was required to participate in militia training exercises in his community as required by local ordinance.

When they enlisted, militia conscripts generally signed a covenant stipulating the conduct, responsibilities, and rights expected of them, and because “few towns had enough resources to provide their militias with any sort of equipment, it was usually expected that each man avail himself of a good firelock and prescribed quantities of gunpowder and lead.” Subsistence farmers and laborers comprised the bulk of the militia, as they “represented the lowest and most numerous classes.” In addition, “craftsmen, artisans, shopkeepers, gentlemen farmers, and other members of the middle class” were obligated to serve, while clergymen, doctors, jurists, and others “whose role was deemed critical to the welfare of the community” were generally exempt. Slaves were excluded from service, and the very wealthy could avoid conscription by hiring substitutes. The effectiveness and preparedness of each militia unit was determined by “the fitness of the conscripts and the professionalism and zeal of the officers, who were generally elected by their own troops.”<sup>15</sup>

Notwithstanding Washington’s often-cited remarks about the shortcomings of militia, the latter provided an important supporting role on occasions such as the one at Assunpink Creek. While he had

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written, shortly after assuming command of the Continentals in 1775, “that no Dependence can be put on the Militia for a continuance in Camp, or Regularity and Discipline during the short time they may stay,” the commanding general did concede that the regular army and militia could act in distinct but mutually supporting capacities.

Washington envisioned that militia units would provide internal security on the home front against Loyalists and Native American tribes, but that in an emergency situation such as the regular army found itself facing during the “Ten Crucial Days” and in particular on January 2, 1777, the various militias would also “be pressed into service with the main army to play a supporting role, although they should never be considered an adequate substitute for Continentals.”<sup>16</sup> Notwithstanding Washington’s less-than-enthusiastic comments about the militia in his correspondence, “the ways he employed it indicate he had a better opinion than he expressed outwardly, or at least he was savvy enough, or desperate enough, to bow to pragmatic necessity.”<sup>17</sup>

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More and more of the imperial troops appeared before the rebel defenders in the waning January daylight of this Thursday afternoon. The British and Hessians sensed that they had their opponent on the run until the creek came into view and they could see the Americans were dug in for a fight. A royal engineer, Captain-Lieutenant Archibald Robertson, observed that Washington’s forces were positioned where Colonel Rall’s Hessian brigade should have been when it was attacked on December 26.<sup>18</sup> He and his fellow officers “were studying the American position through their field telescopes in the deepening twilight.”<sup>19</sup> A British captain named Hall (first name unknown) recalled that the “enemy abandoned Trenton on our approach, after a faint resistance, in which a few were killed on both sides,” and that this “happened . . . late in the day when the rebels, on evacuating the town, withdrew their whole force over

a rivulet, the Assunpink, which runs by the place, and took their position on some high ground near it, with a seeming determined countenance to defend them.”<sup>20</sup>

Washington’s troops had a clear view of the opposing forces from their position on the heights south of the stream. As Cornwallis’s troops occupied the high ground above Trenton, then fully visible from the other side of the creek, the British commander “formed his men into long lines in ‘battalion order’ along the crest of the rising ground where they would be most visible,” while his marching columns of infantry in the town pushed forward toward the creek. The “Americans could see the strength of attacking British and Hessian forces, who outnumbered the defenders.”<sup>21</sup> And the rebels’ numerical inferiority was compounded by their reliance on inexperienced militia to support the Continental regulars.

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Although the Patriot troops along the Assunpink were fewer than Cornwallis’s total force, they were able to deploy more artillery—some 40 field pieces to the enemy’s 28—and these were arranged so as to create overlapping fields of fire. They were the “vital element” in the American defenses. Washington positioned 18 or 19 guns in the center of his alignment, all to cover the bridge—some within 40 yards of it—while placing 12 guns by the upper fords and the rest to cover the lower ford.<sup>22</sup>

Where the commander-in-chief had counted on his big guns to play a decisive role during the attack against the Hessians the week before, now he needed them to anchor his defensive strategy. Henry Knox’s batteries would again be depended on to magnify the army’s destructive force, and they met the challenge in impressive fashion. In the late afternoon and early evening of January 2, the rebel gun crews arrayed along the southern edge of the Assunpink greeted their unwelcome visitors with “the heaviest fire ever delivered on any



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field in the Western Hemisphere up to this time.”<sup>23</sup> Knox recounted to his wife, Lucy, in a letter from Morristown, New Jersey, five days after the battle, that when “the enemy advanced within reach of our cannon,” those guns “saluted them with great vociferation and some execution.”<sup>24</sup>

It has been argued that “Knox’s gunners saved the army from what would have been a disastrous defeat” at the Assunpink.<sup>25</sup> Their display of firepower reflected a remarkable ability by the army’s artillery chief to overcome significant technical challenges in the effective use of his heavy guns. Throughout the war, Knox struggled with a medley of “ill-assorted cannon of various caliber”—captured British cannons, French field pieces, and “guns cast in crude American foundries”—and never achieved uniformity in the army’s artillery. In addition, his guns employed different types of ammunition—some solid cast-iron shot, some grapeshot, and others canister—and the size of those guns varied to such an extent “that ammunition usually was not interchangeable.” In spite of these complications, the young officer assembled a potent force “and rightfully deserves his reputation as ‘father of the American Army artillery.’”<sup>26</sup>

Knox’s gunners were “a new breed of warrior” employing a weapon that displayed “the most unprecedented power.” They “fought indirectly, servicing a machine that killed and destroyed at a distance” by “accelerating projectiles to speeds that surpassed the limits of human vision.”<sup>27</sup> The Continental artillerists at Assunpink were led by a motley assortment of captains who skillfully directed a fierce barrage against their adversary. Four in particular stand out from this period of the war.

Alexander Hamilton, 21, commanded the New York State Artillery Company. An emigrant from the British island colony of Nevis, where he was born out of wedlock, he had been a student at King’s College in New York (Columbia University today) until dropping out to engage in the Patriot insurgency. Hamilton wrote

essays in support of the rebellion and was appointed captain of his artillery company in March 1776. He had come to Washington's attention during the Americans' retreat across New Jersey, in particular on the banks of the Raritan River at Brunswick on December 1. The artillery battery that Hamilton commanded duelled with Cornwallis's field guns while the Continental Army made its getaway under the protective fire of this rearguard action; and Washington's stepgrandson (who became his adopted son), George Washington Parke Custis, later wrote that the commander-in-chief had been "charmed by the brilliant courage and admirable skill" of the young captain.<sup>28</sup>

At Trenton on December 26, Hamilton's battery was positioned with Nathanael Greene's division on the strategic high ground at the head of King and Queen Streets, which dominated the battlefield. By the following March, he would be promoted to lieutenant colonel and serving as an aide-de-camp to the commanding general. From there his role grew dramatically in importance as he became Washington's secretary and right-hand man throughout the war years. In Hamilton, the general "found an aide whose meticulousness, intelligence and zeal made him indispensable."<sup>29</sup>

Sebastian Baumann, 37, led the New York Company of the Continental Artillery that had been authorized by the Continental Congress in late 1775 and organized between December 1775 and May 1776. Like Hamilton's battery, Baumann's company supported General Greene's division during the earlier fighting at Trenton.

Thomas Forrest, 29, headed up the Pennsylvania battery supporting Colonel Hand's contingent in their prolonged delaying action against the enemy that consumed most of January 2.

Joseph Moulder, 62, commanded the 2nd Company of Artillery, Philadelphia Associators. A sailmaker and schooner owner from Philadelphia who had served as a delegate to his colony's provincial convention in 1774, Moulder joined the Continental Army in 1776 as

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the captain in command of his artillery company. He recruited a slew of young soldiers from the city's waterfront to his unit—"seamen, longshoremen, block-makers, riggers, and ships' carpenters" by trade.<sup>30</sup> These nautical types assisted the Marbleheaders in rowing the Continentals across the Delaware River on Christmas night, although their role in that endeavor would receive less attention from chroniclers of the Revolution than the efforts of Colonel Glover's regiment. From its position on Queen Street on December 26, Moulder's battery engaged at close range the troops that Colonel Rall was attempting to rally against the American attack.

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The redcoats put on a good show as they advanced toward the Assunpink Creek in the fading daylight. This was a proud and arrogant army that had ample reason to feel that way. The experience of the British army during the period leading up to the American Revolution was one of "victory without equal in the world," and its "senior officers and sergeants were seasoned veterans of a great world conflict" in which they had triumphed over France and Spain. During a strife-ridden decade from 1755 to 1764, the crown's army had "fought on five continents and defeated every power that stood against it." An impressive legacy of that remarkable record lay in the various regimental honors that spoke to Britain's global record of military success during this period: in Europe (at Minden and Emsdorf), in India (at Plassey and Pondicherry), in North America (at Louisbourg and Quebec), in the West Indies (at Guadeloupe and Martinique), in Cuba (at Moro and Havana), in the Mediterranean (at Minorca), in the Philippines (at Manila), and in Africa (in Senegal).<sup>31</sup>

The movement of British troops as they approached Assunpink Creek—carefully choreographed in preparation for their twilight assault against the rebel forces—reflected a degree of training, experience, and professional rigor that could easily intimidate an

opposing army whose ranks were largely filled with amateur soldiers. Moreover, the redcoats' attire was designed to augment the impression that legions such as theirs sought to convey when contesting 18th century European battlefields. They treated combat as "a dress-up occasion that required fastidious attention to appearance." Their brightly colored uniforms, replete with insignia and accessories, "helped to differentiate among regiments and sides in the smoky confusion of battle," but also suggested to the opposing soldiery how formidable an adversary they faced. The forces of Britannia displayed a variety of adornments and decorations to distinguish between officers and regiments. These included linings and facings of various colors, "waistcoats (vests), hat lace, cockades (a ribbon or feather in a hat), epaulets (shoulder straps often made of strips of cloth, sometimes fringed), [and] gorgets (badges hung around the neck)."<sup>32</sup>

Many of the amateur soldiers now facing these smartly uniformed invaders were dressed in rags. Being on the move for so many months had taken its toll on their shoes and stockings, and "sleeping in the open was hard on clothing."<sup>33</sup> These men "were more concerned with acquiring clothes than caring what color or style they were."<sup>34</sup> When the royals pressed forward on this day, more than a few of the Patriot combatants who had tried to stand against them in earlier battles must have wondered to themselves whether another setback was in the offing.

His Majesty's army had turned the bayonet charge into an art form, and it undoubtedly made an impression on the defenders along the Assunpink—as it often did on American soldiers during the war. The latter instinctively and understandably recoiled from the prospect of facing those lethal blades, and their intense fear of the bayonet seemed in part due to their being much less accustomed to this form of combat than European armies of the time.<sup>35</sup> One account almost waxes poetic in its depiction of Britain's elite warriors as they typically appeared when in battle formation, their

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ranks advancing “as one man, gleaming steel bobbing before them . . . beautifully disciplined troops coming on steadily even in the face of enemy musket fire,” and then, as they reached their objective, “lunging and slashing” with their bayonets. Their infantry “was superb at this sort of thing, the artillery was extremely efficient, and the army’s tactical skill may be judged from the fact that in eight years of war the British regulars (not the Hessians or loyalists) lost only a handful of battles to American troops.”<sup>36</sup>

The steady advance of Cornwallis’s lines would bring the opposing armies closer to their impending clash, as the Hessian troops up front were followed by hundreds of British light infantry, who “were followed by thousands more.” Then about 500 yards from the Assunpink bridge, the “British put artillery pieces into position, and soon the cannons were booming.” With the support of their big field pieces, the imperial troops began to advance in a solid column, their bayonets fixed. The Continentals and militia, “row upon row on the high ground south of the Assunpink, had their weapons primed.” One of them, James Johnston, would recall that they “formed into three lines, front, center, and rear.” Although these men and boys were supported by a “tremendous concentration of artillery power,” the question remained whether they would “be able to stand their ground under bombardment and attack by the world’s best-trained army,” which was about to hit them.<sup>37</sup>

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The redcoats’ use of the bayonet had driven rebel soldiers from the field on prior occasions, but this time the latter were entrenched on high ground with a waterway between them and the advancing enemy, and with plenty of artillery to rain fire down on their adversary. If Washington’s troops could hold the narrow stone bridge over the creek and if Cornwallis could not find a feasible alternative crossing point, no British or Hessian bayonets could come close enough to

intimidate the defenders. For this scenario to prevail, however, the Continentals and militia had to stand their ground rather than break and run. They were keenly aware of how precarious their position was, with a creek in front of them and a river behind them, no boats available for an evacuation, and an elite opposing force of enormous power staring them in the face.

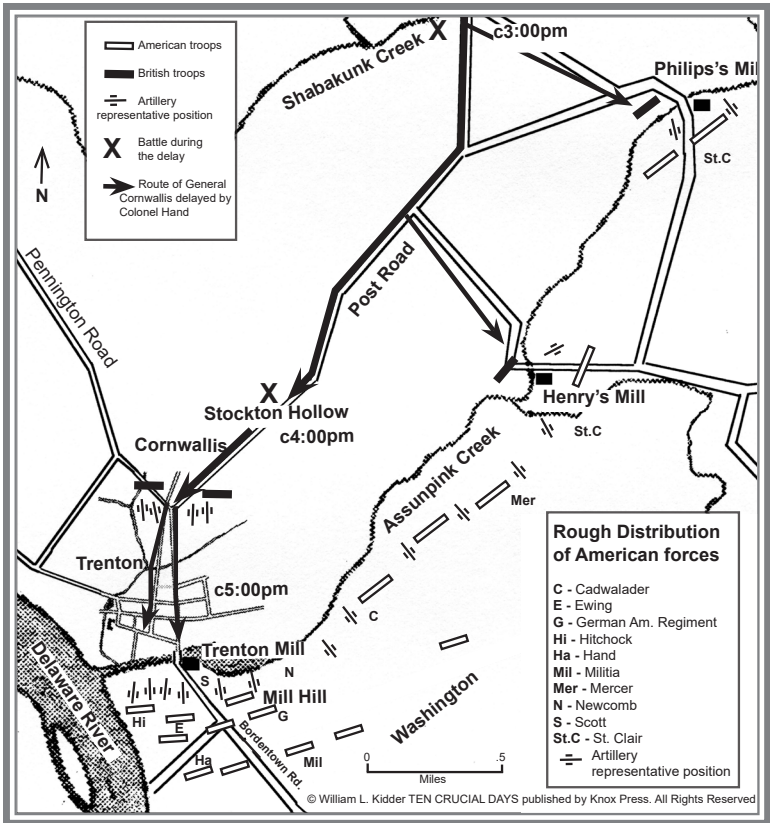
Fischer writes: “The American troops long remembered that moment, when the enemy appeared before them in their full strength. Many recorded their feelings in remarkably similar ways. Most shared a deep sense of foreboding, deeper than they recalled at any other battle.”<sup>38</sup> The comments later put on paper by Washington’s soldiers reflect an overwhelming sense of urgency about what was at stake in this confrontation.

Major James Wilkinson would write 40 years later: “If there ever was a crisis in the affairs of the Revolution, this was the moment; thirty minutes would have sufficed to bring the two armies into contact, and thirty more would have decided the combat; and, covered with woe, Columbia might have wept the loss of her beloved Chief and most valorous sons.”<sup>39</sup>

Ensign Robert Beale of the 5th Virginia Regiment that was led by Charles Scott reported: “This was the most awful crisis, no possible chance of crossing the River; ice as large as houses floating down, and no retreat to the mountains, the British between us and them.”<sup>40</sup>

Captain Stephen Olney of Rhode Island, who had endured the Continentals’ siege of Boston, the failed New York campaign, and the harrowing retreat to the Delaware River, “always remembered the stand at Assunpink as the critical moment of the war.” This officer recalled: “It appeared to me then that our army was in the most desperate situation I had ever known it.” He and his comrades needed no reminder that they “had no boats to carry us across the Delaware” and that it would serve no purpose to withdraw “into the south part of Jersey, where there was no support for an army.”<sup>41</sup>

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Battle of Assunpink Creek - January 2, 1777

Captain Olney's fellow Rhode Islander, Private Howland, recollected that "on one hour, yes, on forty minutes, commencing at the moment when the British troops first saw the bridge and the creek before them, depended the all-important, the all-absorbing question, whether we should be independent states or conquered rebels!" And he elaborated: "Had the army of Cornwallis within that space have crossed the bridge, or forded the creek, unless a miracle intervened, there would have been an end of the American army."<sup>42</sup>

Captain Thomas Rodney of the Light Infantry Company of Dover, a Delaware militia unit, and younger brother of Caesar Rodney,

reported after the battle that he had sought to corral one of the men in his company whose eagerness to join the fray appears to have been lacking, and in so doing he reflected the intensity of the moment. “After sunset this afternoon the enemy came down in a very heavy column to force the bridge,” Rodney recalled, while noting: “The fire was very heavy and the light troops were ordered to fly to the support of that important post.” As they approached the bridge, he “stepped out of the front to order my men to close up” and observed that “at this time Martinus Sipple was about 10 steps behind the man next in front of him.” Directing his wrath at Sipple, the captain immediately drew his sword and “threatened to cut his head off if he did not keep close.” According to Rodney, the offending militiaman “then sprang forward and I returned to the front.”<sup>43</sup>

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The invaders would make three attempts to establish a foothold on the southern side of the Assunpink Creek by launching a series of “probing attacks.” The British and Hessian commanders drove their troops forward in the increasing darkness, looking to exploit any weakness they could detect in the rebel defenses and hoping “that one strong blow might send the rebels running as it had so many times before.”<sup>44</sup> It was after 5 p.m. “and growing darker moment by moment, when the British line reached the bridge and made its first futile effort to storm the span and gain the other side.” Although it was difficult to fire with any accuracy in the fading sunlight, “the Continentals had a great defensive advantage in being able to concentrate on the bridge and keep up withering volleys, throwing out a screen of shot and shell which the redcoats were quite unable to penetrate.”<sup>45</sup>

The initial probe was launched by the British light infantry and Hessian jägers at the lower ford near the river. These troops occupied



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the houses closest to the creek that were directly across from a brigade of New England soldiers deployed between the bridge and the river on the other side of the Assunpink. From there the British and Hessians exchanged fire with the defenders and then pushed down to the edge of the creek. They tried to cross “after sunset but before dark,” but “Washington saw them coming and ordered Hitchcock’s Rhode Island Continentals to stop them. The attackers were met by a storm of musketry, and the artillery joined in.”<sup>46</sup> As New Englanders had fired the first shots of the Revolution on the American side at Lexington and Concord, so now they fired the first shots in the Continental Army’s last-ditch stand against the enemy effort to storm across the creek that separated the two armies.

Private Howland, who had joined his fellow Rhode Islanders in retreating across the creek from the advancing enemy, remembered Washington’s order and the response by those soldiers. According to Howland, “When I was about halfway across the bridge, the General addressed himself to Col. Hitchcock, the commander of the brigade, directing him to march his men to that field and form them immediately, or instantly, or as quick as possible; which of the terms he used, I am not certain.” At the same time, Washington extended his arm and pointed “to a little meadow at a short distance on the south side of the creek [between the Delaware River and the bridge]. . . . This order was promptly obeyed and then we advanced to the edge of the stream, facing the enemy.”<sup>47</sup> The latter “soon found it prudent to fall back under cover of the houses” on the north side of the Assunpink.<sup>48</sup>

As Stryker portrays this encounter, Colonel Hitchcock’s soldiers “had taken position in a field on the Bloomsbury farm between the bridge and the river, and had thrown up a temporary breastwork,” which proved to be a timely maneuver as “a determined party, principally of Hessians, attempted to cross the creek at a good fording-place . . . but the brave New England

Continental sent a rain of lead on the attacking party, and they quickly abandoned the project.”<sup>49</sup>

The second probe was made at the most critical point of defense for Washington’s army. A column of Hessian grenadiers from the battalions commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Otto von Linsing and Lieutenant Colonel Heinrich von Block, respectively, charged the bridge.

In this narrow and heavily defended corridor, these veteran troops were tasked with carrying out a mission they were “trained to do, to assault fortified positions with concentrated force.”<sup>50</sup> They had come to America from a homeland in which military service was both expected and honored—in which “all able-bodied men were required to undergo military training before either making the military a career or serving part-time in the militia”—and they had anticipated that the effort to defeat the colonial rebellion would be a brief and triumphant venture against an untrained and inexperienced adversary. Furthermore, their officers had been “generally enthusiastic about the war, being eager for active service with its opportunities for recognition and promotion.” But now, after several months of fighting in the New World, these combatants from a distant land had been subjected to many of the same hardships as their foe, having to contend with battlefield deaths, wounds, and disease, while in many cases wearing worn uniforms that afforded them inadequate protection against frigid winter temperatures.<sup>51</sup>

The Hessian attackers brought forward four artillery pieces in support of their effort to gain the bridge, while deploying other cannons along the banks of the creek, and they positioned jägers with their trademark short rifles in nearby buildings to target the rebel gun crews. The Hessian cannons launched a barrage that lasted for about 12 minutes, which prompted a reply from the American guns, and then the grenadiers “came forward with bravery and

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determination.”<sup>52</sup> That, and their discipline and training, had availed them against the colonials on earlier battlefields—at Long Island, Kip’s Bay, White Plains, and Fort Washington—but any hope they may have had of pushing back the rebels one more time was quite literally blasted within a matter of minutes.

The German assailants encountered a storm of shot and shell that even Europe’s most skilled professional warriors could not penetrate, and a bloodbath resulted. The three Virginia regiments under Colonel Scott were waiting for the enemy as they approached the bridge, and those soldiers from the Old Dominion responded with a murderous salvo. Scott’s men—with Hand’s sharpshooters directly behind them—and their supporting artillery pieces, almost 20 in number, “shredded” the Hessians’ advance before they could reach the middle of the bridge.<sup>53</sup> The hail of fire that engulfed the grenadiers killed or wounded 31 of them and compelled 29 others to come forward and surrender “rather than retreat through the heavy fire.”<sup>54</sup>

In the final probe, a detachment of redcoats made multiple attempts to cross the bridge, but the American cannons that were concentrated in this area punished them severely. With the Hessians having been repulsed, Cornwallis ordered his British infantry forward to secure a foothold on the other side of the creek; however, the British column stalled at the head of the bridge, “leaving dead and wounded littering the ground.” The redcoats “regrouped and surged ahead again, this time forcing their way onto the bridge before they too were forced back,” and then Cornwallis launched a final attempt by sending forward “another strong column” to take the bridge. In response, the rebel artillery “pounded the British infantry” and with John Cadwalader’s repositioned militia and artillery reinforcing the front line of Continental regulars, the British attackers once more “broke against the bridge and retreated into the darkness.”<sup>55</sup>

The narrow bridge became a perfect killing zone in the course of these three attempts by the redcoats to force their way across. In the wake of their final charge, the bloodstained span was littered with the dead and dying of His Majesty's finest soldiery. They had risked their all to achieve the objective assigned to them—to establish a bridgehead on the other side of the creek—because that was what they were trained, and had been ordered, to do.

Cornwallis's army was comprised of men who in various units represented a proud and long-standing tradition of service shared among their regimental peers. Most were of humble origins—farmers, laborers, and tradesmen—while a few were convicts who chose military service over incarceration when given the choice. They had volunteered for the army and many made it their career, as they valued the steady job and pay. However dangerous a soldier's life might be, it represented “an attractive alternative to working class teenagers and young men whose only prospects were long hours of dreary and sometimes hazardous manual labor or an oppressive apprenticeship where they could be overworked or beaten with no recourse.”<sup>56</sup>

Many of His Majesty's soldiers “thought, and were encouraged to believe, that their unit was the best in the army. They also felt a deep loyalty to their king that set them in firm opposition to the Americans they were battling.”<sup>57</sup> These soldiers were driven by “ideals of loyalty, fidelity, honor, duty, discipline, and service that were as sacred to British Regulars as the cause of liberty was to the American rebels.” To those engaged in combat, “the war was not primarily a conflict of power or interest. It was a clash of principles in which they deeply believed.”<sup>58</sup>

Sergeant Joseph White of Massachusetts, then about 21 years of age, recalled that the redcoats advanced “in solid columns” in their last probing attack and that the defenders “let them come on some ways. Then, by a signal given, we all fired together. The enemy

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retreated off the bridge and formed again, and we were ready for them. Our whole artillery was again discharged at them.”<sup>59</sup>

An unknown militiaman described how the rebel infantry joined their artillery crews in blasting away at the crown’s men:

... our men poured upon them from musketry and artillery a shower of bullets under which, however, they continued to advance, though their speed was diminished. And as the column reached the bridge it moved slower and slower until the head of it was gradually pressed nearly over, when our fire became so destructive that they broke their ranks and fled.

It was then that our army raised a shout, and such a shout I never since heard; by what signal or word of command, I know not. The line [of men] was more than a mile in length and from the nature of the ground the extremes were not in sight of each other, yet they shouted as one man.

The British column halted instantly. The officers restored the ranks and again they rushed the bridge, and again was the shower of bullets poured upon them with redoubled fury. This time the column broke before it reached the centre of the bridge, and their retreat was again followed by the same hearty shout from our line.

They returned a third time to the charge but it was in vain. We shouted after them again but they had had enough of it.<sup>60</sup>

Sergeant White recounted the final British thrust: “They came on a third time. We loaded with canister shot and let them come nearer. We fired all together again, and such destruction it made, you cannot conceive. The bridge looked red as blood, with their killed and wounded and red coats.”<sup>61</sup>

Canister and grapeshot—exploding shells of different sizes, in the form of a tin can and canvas bag, respectively—were packed with various objects such as pieces of chain, iron balls, nails, and stones. They were most effective when employed against massed concentrations of enemy infantry. When a cannon fired its canister

or grapeshot, the force of the blast ignited the fuse on the shell and it would explode in midair or when it hit the ground and scatter its lethal contents in all directions. This type of ordnance was used to maximum effect against the dense formation of redcoats that funneled its way onto the stone overpass.

The failure of the final British thrust at the bridge ended the close-quarter fighting on January 2. Notwithstanding the exchange of artillery fire that continued for some time—and with the benefit of knowing in retrospect what would happen before daylight reappeared—the Battle of Assunpink Creek was over. With its back to the wall, or more precisely the Delaware River, Washington's army had survived one more fight, and so had the Revolutionary enterprise it symbolized.

Once the redcoats had retreated a safe distance from the bridge, the defenders moved up to the now battle-scarred structure. One of them, militiaman William Hutchinson of Chester County, Pennsylvania, serving with Cadwalader's Philadelphia Associators, recalled the engagement "in which this declarant partook with all the patriotic glow and ardor of a freeman fighting for the liberties of his country," as one in which the attackers "were driven back with great slaughter occasioned by the well-directed fire of our artillery." He described the grisly scene where the enemy combatants had fallen: "Their dead bodies lay thicker and closer together for a space than I ever beheld sheaves of wheat lying in a field over which the reapers had just passed."<sup>62</sup>

Captain Rodney of Delaware summed up the outcome of the fierce struggle at the deadliest crossing point: "We kept possession of the bridge altho' the enemy attempted several times to carry it but were repulsed each time with great slaughter."<sup>63</sup> In echoing this assessment, an unidentified Connecticut officer observed that the crown's men sought "to force the bridge . . . with great vigor . . . several times and were as often broken by our artillery," while noting

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that some enemy officers drove their men forward by hitting them with the flat of their swords.<sup>64</sup> Lieutenant Charles Willson Peale of the Philadelphia Associators confirmed the intense exchange of fire when he wrote that “some of our artillery stood their ground till the enemy advanced within 40 yards, and they were very near losing the field piece. . . . some unlucky shot from a cannon killed one or two of the 3rd Battalion of Philadelphia troops,” as well as some militiamen from Cumberland County, New Jersey.<sup>65</sup>

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By 6 p.m., when darkness reigned over the battlefield, the British and Hessian troops had abandoned their efforts to push across the Assunpink Creek, pending the arrival of the rest of Cornwallis’s army. The exchange of cannon fire had so dominated this engagement “that participants often later referred to the encounter as a cannonade rather than a battle.”<sup>66</sup> Indeed, writers of that era frequently referred to it as “the cannonade at Trent Town.”<sup>67</sup> Even after the last enemy charge failed, the rebel artillery “still kept up a determined fire, throwing shot into the town from the high ground on the south side of the creek, which commanded the village,” while the British light batteries returned fire “although without effect.”<sup>68</sup>

Henry Knox reported that “a few shells we now and then chucked into the town to prevent them enjoying their new quarters securely.”<sup>69</sup> Most of the enemy fell back to the high ground at the upper end of town beyond the range of the American field pieces, although “during the evening the streets were thronged with crowds of redcoats.”<sup>70</sup>

Lieutenant James McMichael of the 1st Pennsylvania Regiment, a native of Scotland who had emigrated to Pennsylvania and resided in Lancaster County when the war began, kept a diary during his entire service with the Continental Army. In his entry for January 2, he recorded that the British and Hessian forces “reached town at 5 P.M.,

but our artillery fire was so severe, that the enemy retreated out of town and encamped on an adjacent hill. We continued firing bombs up to seven o'clock P.M., when we were ordered to rest, which we very commodiously did upon a number of rails for a bed."<sup>71</sup>

Stryker's analysis highlights the perilous nature of the American position during the fight along the Assunpink: "It will always appear singular that the invaders did not attempt to cross the creek at some of the many fording places on the east of the town, such as at Henry's Mill or Phillips Ford, the one a mile, the other two miles above the mill-dam at the bridge." As he points out, there was no way for Washington "to protect the whole stream, and had the British forced the American right and driven them toward Trenton Ferry and the river, nothing could have saved the entire army." In Stryker's judgment, a "determined advance" by the imperial forces "along the line and a half hour's fight would have decided the battle. The American army would have been well-nigh annihilated, and with it the fate of America and the hopes of freemen."<sup>72</sup>

In the letter he wrote on January 7 to his wife, Lucy, from Morristown, Henry Knox echoed this recognition of the potential trap awaiting Washington's troops as he described their position at the moment of battle. "The creek was in our front, our left on the Delaware, our right in a wood, parallel to the creek," according to Knox, and the army's "situation was strong, to be sure: but hazardous on this account, that had our right wing been defeated, the defeat of the left would almost have been an inevitable consequence and the whole thrown into confusion or pushed into the Delaware, as it was impassable by boats."<sup>73</sup>

Under the circumstances, it is fair to argue that the dark of night, at least as much as the Americans' determined stand against the enemy sorties along the creek, saved their entire force from disaster on January 2 by curtailing Cornwallis's assault—even if it only



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postponed until the next morning the likely move by His Majesty's forces to take advantage of the rebels' vulnerable position. As nightfall enveloped both armies, the American soldiers could briefly savor the success of their defensive action against the attackers while Washington and his senior officers contemplated how best to cope with the situation in which they found themselves.

The record of the Assunpink battle was, Fischer writes, "largely missed until the accounts of many individual soldiers and junior officers on both sides emerged to document it in detail. It was not a general engagement . . . but a series of probing attacks, driven home with high courage" by the British and Hessian forces.<sup>74</sup> This was not an all-out assault by Cornwallis because the night set in before he could bring his army's full weight to bear against the rebels, as much of his column was strung out for miles and took some time to arrive on the scene.

Definitive information is unavailable concerning the casualties sustained by both sides during the fighting that day, either on the Princeton Road or in the battle at Assunpink; however, it is estimated that some 365 British and Hessian soldiers were killed, wounded, or captured as compared with about 100 Americans. This included about 140 Hessians and 225 redcoats, with at least 75 of the British casualties occurring on the way to Trenton and 150 in the fighting at the creek. These numbers are probably conservative, as losses on either side may well have been higher.<sup>75</sup> The imperial vanguard of about 1,500 troops bore the brunt of the fighting, because Cornwallis's main body was delayed so long by "the wretched condition of the roads" and the American skirmishers led by Colonel Hand.<sup>76</sup>

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In a history of Trenton that was published by the Trenton Historical Society in 1929 to commemorate the city's 250th anniversary,

Frederick Ferris sought to give the Battle of Assunpink Creek its due by comparing the significance of the two encounters at Trenton. In weighing the foray against the Hessian garrison after the Christmas night river crossing against the Assunpink fight a week later, this local historian observed: “[It] is unquestionably true that this later engagement . . . was of even greater moment than the surprise attack on the Hessians the week before.” He noted that if Cornwallis’s forces had “been successful in their attempts to storm the bridge, Washington might have found his army split asunder and the struggle for national independence brought to a sudden, unfavorable end.”<sup>77</sup>

Ferris took into consideration the accounts of American soldiers who were present on January 2 in comparing the two battles at Trenton: “When these descriptive and interpretative statements are considered in the aggregate, it becomes plain that the second Battle of Trenton was, for the Continental army, a defensive operation of vast import.” In the raid on the Hessian garrison on December 26, “Washington was the aggressor engaged in attacking what was at best a mere outpost,” as contrasted with “the clash at the Assunpink” where “he was defending against a formidable British army under the most competent leadership.” In Ferris’s estimation, Washington’s Assunpink victory “may be said, without any exaggeration, to have been a saving factor for the patriot cause.”<sup>78</sup>

In the chapter he contributed to the above work, Ferris referenced an article by John J. Cleary in the November 11, 1923 edition of the *Trenton Sunday Times-Advertiser* about C. C. Haven, a “Trenton historian who was a faithful and earnest student of local Revolutionary lore.” In that article, there appeared several verses of a poem probably written by Edward S. Ellis, a former superintendent of the Trenton public schools, who portrayed the fight at the creek in an impassioned tone. His lyrics included the following:

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Now tier on tier our patriots ranged themselves upon the ridge,  
And now again the redcoats charged upon Assunpink bridge;  
Three times Cornwallis' hosts, with ringing shout and shell,  
Came rushing down upon us like the very hosts of hell!  
But artillery and musketry we poured in deadly rain,  
And often as they yelled and charged, we beat them back again,  
Until the victory was ours! All hail our Washington!  
Assunpink's battle has been fought, Assunpink's battle won!<sup>79</sup>

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The events of January 2, 1777 provided the essential pivot point from the first American victory of the “Ten Crucial Days” to the last by ensuring that the initial Trenton engagement one week earlier was not a “one-day wonder” but the beginning of a chain of events that altered the whole character of the Revolutionary contest. Had Washington been defeated at Assunpink Creek, his victory at Trenton on December 26, 1776 would have been a historical footnote similar to the Battle of Harlem Heights—a minor American success in September 1776 that did nothing to alter the course of the nearly disastrous New York campaign—and there would have been no victory at Princeton on January 3.

The Assunpink engagement was arguably the most critical moment of the “Ten Crucial Days” and perhaps the most unappreciated American victory in the Revolutionary War. In terms of the number of soldiers involved, it was the largest battle fought during these 10 remarkable days. It was the only one in which the enemy had a numerical advantage, the only one in which Washington's army had to fight both British and Hessian troops, the only one in which the crown's forces were led by a British general—who also happened to be the most competent and energetic field commander in His Majesty's Army, and the only one in which the geographic position of the Patriot forces put them at mortal peril of being trapped between two natural barriers—a creek on one side and

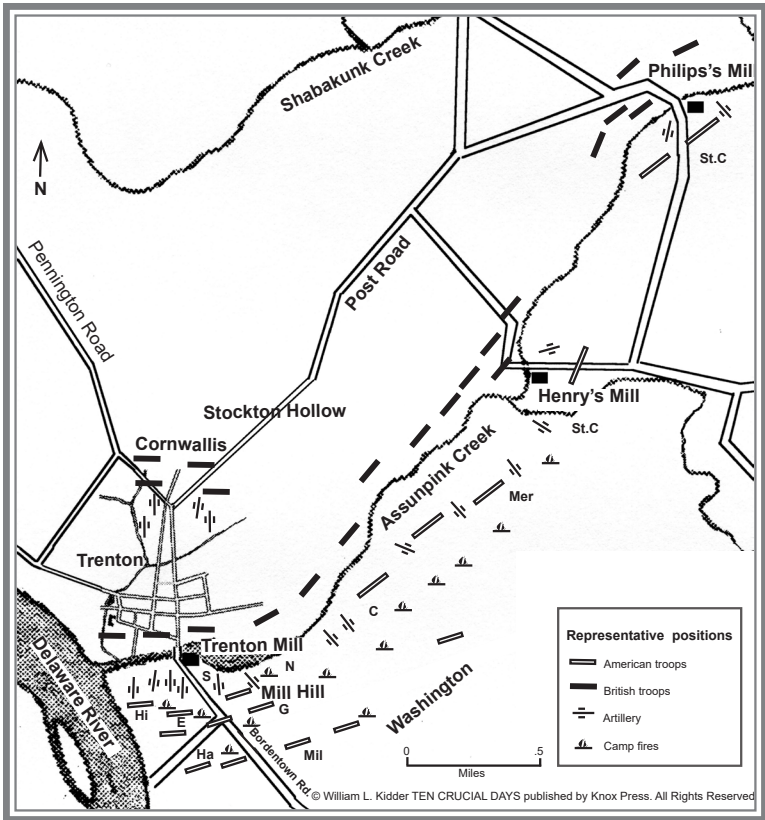
a river on the other—with no means of evacuation if they were outflanked and driven back against the riverbank. January 2, 1777 also featured the longest battle of the “Ten Crucial Days” if one counts as a single encounter the resistance by Colonel Hand’s men during their fighting withdrawal from Maidenhead to Trenton and the shoot-out at the creek immediately following their delaying action.

Perhaps most importantly, this occasion marked the first time that the Continental Army beat back an attack by British troops during a significant battle. As Fischer observes, “For the American troops it was a great victory. For their general it was a model of a brilliantly managed defensive battle in the same town where Colonel Rall had fought, but with very different results.”<sup>80</sup>

Had the rebel army failed to stop the advance of the elite British and Hessian units at Assunpink Creek, the result would in all probability have been the destruction of that army and possibly with it the cause of American independence. And that scenario would almost certainly have entailed fatal consequences for Washington, either on the battlefield or at the end of a British rope—the latter being “a dark specter that hung over many of the rebel leaders” as it was the penalty prescribed for treason against the King of England.<sup>81</sup>

Nathaniel Philbrick opines that if Cornwallis’s effort to cross the Assunpink bridge and overrun the rebel army had succeeded, “the war was as good as finished” for the capital city of Philadelphia “would surely [have fallen] that winter, and the Continental Congress in Baltimore might very well [have decided] that a negotiated settlement was in the country’s best interests.” By choosing to fight on this ground on January 2, “Washington had managed to conflate the standoff at the Old North Bridge in Concord with the Battle of Bunker Hill in Charlestown to create what was, even if it is largely unappreciated today, the make-or-break moment of the War of Independence.”<sup>82</sup>

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Troop Dispositions, night of January 2, 1777

Mark Maloy shares this assessment of how precarious the American position was: “If the British were able to penetrate Washington’s lines or roll up on his flanks, there would be no place to retreat, and his army would be completely crushed. It was important that they prevent the British Regulars from crossing the Assunpink at all.” In sum, “the outnumbered Americans appeared to be in a dangerous predicament that could have ended the entire rebellion.”<sup>83</sup>

Historians of the Revolution never mention Assunpink Creek in the same breath as Saratoga or Yorktown—the most recognized and

*The Road to Assunpink Creek*

significant battles in that struggle, with the former in 1777 leading to France's crucial intervention in the contest and the latter in 1781 breaking the back of England's will to fight against the colonials—but those later engagements might very well have never occurred if January 2, 1777 had turned out differently for Washington's army. The events of that day, including the delaying action by Colonel Hand's men and the fighting at the creek, plausibly created a deciding moment of as great consequence for the cause of American independence as the far better-known confrontations that occurred later in the war. Perhaps no military action in our country's history is more paradoxical than the one on the road to Assunpink Creek, and at the bridge that crossed it, in the sense that its obscurity in the public mind and neglect by many historians is so disproportionate to its impact on the course of a conflict with global implications.

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Continental campfires along the mill pond at Assunpink Creek,  
January 2, 1777 – 19th century woodcut