



# Colorado Military Historians

Newsletter

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## Battle of Trenton



# The Road to Trenton: How Washington's Bold Gamble Saved the Revolution

By David Manley

*"These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman."*

— Thomas Paine, The American Crisis, December 1776

## A Nation on the Brink

By December 1776, the American Revolution stood on the edge of collapse. After a series of defeats in New York and a desperate retreat across New Jersey, General George Washington's Continental Army had been reduced to fewer than 6,000 effective troops. Exhaustion, illness, and desertion had taken their toll. Morale was low, enlistments were expiring, and the army lacked proper food, clothing, and ammunition. British forces and their German auxiliaries believed the rebellion would soon crumble. But Washington saw opportunity in adversity. With his army encamped along the west bank of the Delaware River, he prepared a bold counterstrike — one that could revive both the army's purpose and the revolutionary cause itself.

## The Situation in Trenton

Trenton, New Jersey, was a small town on the Delaware's eastern bank, occupied by roughly 1,400 Hessian soldiers under Colonel Johann Rall. His command consisted of the Rall, Knyphausen, and Lossberg regiments, supported by light artillery under Lieutenant Andreas Wiederhold. Although warned that his position was vulnerable, Rall dismissed advice to fortify the town, reportedly saying, 'Let them come. We will go at them with the bayonet.' He quartered his men in houses rather than entrenched positions. The nearest reinforcements, under Colonel Carl von Donop, were ten miles away in Bordentown — too distant to help once the attack began.

## A Plan of Daring and Desperation

Washington resolved to cross the ice-choked Delaware River on the night of December 25–26, 1776, and attack Trenton at dawn. Three separate crossings were planned:

Washington's main column north of Trenton, a force under Colonel John Cadwalader farther south, and a supporting detachment under General James Ewing near Trenton Ferry. Only Washington's force made it across; the others were turned back by the storm. His command included key officers: Major General Nathanael Greene, Brigadier General John Sullivan, Colonel Henry Knox, Colonel John Glover and his Marblehead mariners, and Captain William Washington with Lieutenant James Monroe leading the advance guard. Washington's password for the night summed up the mission's stakes: 'Victory or Death.'

## The Night of the Crossing

As night fell, freezing rain and sleet lashed the Delaware. The operation depended on Colonel John Glover's Marblehead Regiment, seasoned mariners from Massachusetts who had previously rescued the Continental Army from Long Island. Working through darkness, ice, and bitter cold, Glover's men ferried thousands of soldiers, horses, and cannon across the river in large Durham boats. Their seamanship made the difference between success and disaster. The crossing took nearly ten hours — twice as long as planned — with many soldiers suffering frostbite or exhaustion. By 4 a.m., Washington's 2,400 troops had completed the crossing. They began a grueling nine-mile march through snow and hail toward Trenton, arriving after sunrise. Several men perished along the way, including Captain John Flahaven and Private Jacob Getman, who froze to death. Despite the hardships, discipline and morale held. Washington rode among his soldiers, urging them forward and sharing their privations.

## The Enemy Unaware

Inside Trenton, the Hessians were resting after days of picket duty and false alarms. Although warnings reached Rall on Christmas night, he did not fully mobilize his forces. At dawn, Washington's army advanced in two columns: Greene's via Pennington Road and Sullivan's along the River Road. Colonel Edward Hand's Pennsylvania riflemen led the way, skirmishing with Hessian outposts and driving them back into the town. The Hessians attempted to form ranks but were quickly hemmed in between the converging American columns.

## A Short, Fierce Battle

The battle began around 8 a.m. and lasted less than an hour. American artillery under Colonel Henry Knox fired from elevated positions at King and Queen Streets. During the fighting: Lieutenant James Monroe was wounded in the shoulder while leading a charge on

a Hessian cannon, saved by Dr. John Riker; Captain William Washington was also wounded; Colonel Johann Rall was mortally wounded while rallying his troops near the Presbyterian Church. Nearly 900 Hessians were captured, along with six cannons, muskets, ammunition, and vital supplies. American casualties were minimal — two killed and five wounded in combat.

## Aftermath and Significance

The victory at Trenton transformed the course of the war. The Continental Army gained critical supplies, strengthened its cohesion, and restored its sense of purpose and resolve after months of retreat. Within days, Washington struck again at Princeton, forcing British troops from most of New Jersey. The 'Ten Crucial Days' between December 25 and January 3 became a turning point of the Revolution. Enlistments surged, confidence returned, and Washington's leadership united an army that had nearly fallen apart. Many officers who distinguished themselves at Trenton — Nathanael Greene, Edward Hand, and John Stark — would go on to shape later victories at Princeton, Saratoga, and in the southern campaigns.

## Lessons from Trenton

The road to Trenton offers lessons in leadership and perseverance: Adaptability — Washington's willingness to act boldly amid uncertainty turned defeat into triumph. Discipline — Despite hunger and exhaustion, the army maintained cohesion under fire. Logistics and morale — The capture of supplies, and the renewed sense of purpose it brought, helped sustain the Continental Army through the winter. Courage of individuals — From Glover's mariners to Monroe's wound, personal bravery defined the battle's outcome.

## Did You Know?

The Hessians at Trenton were not drunk — a common myth — but exhausted from constant alarms. Washington's success depended on river pilots from Marblehead, Massachusetts, whose seamanship made the crossing possible. Hessian prisoners were treated humanely and later integrated into American communities after the war. Two future presidents — George Washington and James Monroe — fought side by side that morning.

## Upcoming Event: The Battle of Trenton Wargame – December 14

To commemorate this campaign, David Manley will host a Battle of Trenton wargame on Sunday, December 14, during the monthly meeting of the Colorado Military Historians. The scenario will be played with 28mm figures using the Live Free or Die rules from Little Wars TV, recreating Washington's daring attack and the Hessian defense in detailed miniature.

## References

Washington's Crossing by David Hackett Fischer (Oxford University Press, 2004). The British Are Coming: The War for America, Lexington to Princeton, 1775–1777 by Rick Atkinson (Henry Holt and Company, 2019).