

## Washington Crosses the Delaware, 1776

December 1776 was a desperate time for George Washington and the American Revolution. The ragtag Continental Army was encamped along the Pennsylvania shore of the Delaware River exhausted, demoralized and uncertain of its future.

The troubles had begun the previous August when British and Hessian troops invaded Long Island routing the colonial forces, forcing a desperate escape to the island of Manhattan. The British followed up their victory with an attack on Manhattan that compelled the Americans to again retreat, this time across the Hudson River to New Jersey.

The British followed in hot pursuit, chasing the Americans through New Jersey and by December had forced the Continental Army to abandon the state and cross the Delaware into Pennsylvania. With New Jersey in their firm control and Rhode Island successfully occupied, the British were confident that the Revolution had been crushed. The Continental Army appeared to be merely an annoyance soon to be swatted into oblivion like a bothersome bee at a picnic.

To compound Washington's problems, the enlistments of the majority of the militias under his command were due to expire at the end of the month and the troops return to their homes. Washington had to do something and quickly.

His decision was to attack the British. The target was the Hessian-held town of Trenton just across the Delaware River.

During the night of December 25, Washington led his troops across the ice-swollen Delaware about 9 miles north of Trenton. The weather was horrendous and the river treacherous. Raging winds combined with snow, sleet and rain to produce almost impossible conditions. To add to the difficulties, a significant number of Washington's force marched through the snow without shoes.

The next morning they attacked to the south, taking the Hessian garrison by surprise and over-running the town. After fierce fighting, and the loss of their commander, the Hessians surrendered.

Washington's victory was complete but his situation precarious. The violent weather continued - making a strike towards Princeton problematic. Washington and his commanding officers decided to retrace their steps across the Delaware taking their Hessian prisoners with them. The news of the American victory spread rapidly through the colonies reinvigorating the failing spirit of the Revolution. The battle's outcome also gave Washington and his officers the confidence to mount another campaign. On December 30 they again crossed the Delaware, attacked

and won another victory at Trenton on January 2, and then pushed on to Princeton defeating the British there on January 3.

Although not apparent at the time, these battles were a decisive turning point in the Revolution. The victories pulled the languishing Revolution out of the depths of despair, galvanized colonial support, shocked the British and convinced potential allies such as France, Holland and Spain, that the Continental Army was a force to be reckoned with.

"For God's sake, keep by your officers!"

*Elisha Bostwick was a soldier in the Continental Army who took part in the battle and published his memoirs shortly after. We join his story as Washington (whom he refers to as "his Excellency") and his force begin to cross the Delaware:*

"[Our] army passed through Bethlehem and Moravian town and so on to the Delaware which we crossed 9 miles north of Trenton and encamped on the Pennsylvania side and there remained to the 24th December. [O]ur whole army was then set on motion and toward evening began to re-cross the Delaware but by obstructions of ice in the river did not all get across till quite late in the evening, and all the time a constant fall of snow with some rain, and finally our march began with the torches of our field pieces stuck in the, exhalers. [They] sparkled and blazed in the storm all night and about day light a halt was made at which time his Excellency and aids came near to the front on the side of the path where soldiers stood.

I heard his Excellency as he was coming on speaking to and encouraging the soldiers. The words he spoke as he passed by where I stood and in my hearing were these:

'Soldiers, keep by your officers. For God's sake, keep by your officers!' Spoke in a deep and solemn voice.

While passing a slanting, slippery bank his Excellency's horse's hind feet both slipped from under him, and he seized his horse's mane and the horse recovered.

Our horses were then unharnessed and the artillery men prepared. We marched on and it was not long before we heard the out sentries of the enemy both on the road we were in and the eastern road, and their out guards retreated firing, and our army, then with a quick step pushing on upon both roads, at the same time entered the town. Their artillery taken, they resigned with little opposition, about nine hundred, all Hessians, with 4 brass field pieces; the remainder crossing the bridge at the lower end of the town escaped....

Marched the next day with our prisoners back to an encampment. I here make a few remarks as to the personal appearance of the Hessians. They are of a moderate stature, rather broad shoulders, their limbs not of equal

proportion, light complexion with a bluish tinge, hair cued as tight to head as possible, sticking straight back like the handle of an iron skillet. Their uniform blue with black facings, brass drums which made a tinkling sound, their flag or standard of the richest black silk and the devices upon it and the lettering in gold leaf....

When crossing the Delaware with the prisoners in flat bottom boats the ice continually stuck to the boats, driving them down stream; the boatmen endeavoring to clear off the ice pounded the boat, and stamping with their feet, beckoned to the prisoners to do the same, and they all set to jumping at once with their cues flying up and down, soon shook off the ice from the boats, and the next day recrossed the Delaware again and returned back to Trenton, and there on the first of January 1777 our years service expired, and then by the pressing solicitation of his Excellency a part of those whose time was out consented on a ten dollar bounty to stay six weeks longer, and although desirous as others to return home, I engaged to stay that time and made every exertion in my power to make as many of the soldiers stay with me as I could, and quite a number did engage with me who otherwise would have went home. "

References:

Bostwick's account appears in Commager, Henry Steele and Robert B. Morris, *The Spirit of 'Seventy Six* (1958); Fischer, David Hackett, *Washington's Crossing* (2004).

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