

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION



GREAT
BATTLES
FOR BOYS

JOE GIORELLO

The American Revolution

Great Battles for Boys
EXCERPT

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with
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Great Battles The American Revolution

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Excerpt Edition

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

Introduction

The Battles of Lexington and Concord

The Battle of Bunker Hill

The Other Fight for Freedom

Battle of Long Island

[The Battle of Trenton](#)

The Battle of Princeton

General George Washington

The Battle of Brandywine Creek

The Battle of Saratoga

Valley Forge

The Battle of Monmouth

The Battle of Camden

Women of the American Revolution

Battle of Kings Mountain

The Battle of Cowpens

The Battle of Guilford Court House

The Battle of Yorktown

The Aftermath of Victory

[More Books in the Great Battles for Boys Series](#)

THE BATTLE OF TRENTON

“Crossing the Delaware”

December 25–26, 1776



Washington crossing the Delaware on Christmas Eve.

BY NOVEMBER 1776, George Washington was feeling desperate.

The humiliating defeat in the Battle of Long Island only led to more losing battles. Things looked grim for his military.

Consider this: The Continental Army had about 20,000 soldiers when the war began. That force had dwindled as men were killed in action, wounded, or captured. And with each defeat, the

American army lost more of its artillery and ammunition, along with other essential supplies such as food and clothing.

Washington's men were exhausted, hungry, and wondering if this war could be won.

And soon, at the end of December 1776, Washington would face yet another challenge: enlistments.

Enlistment is the act of joining the armed services. An enlistment is usually for a specific amount of time. Most men who had joined the Continental Army signed up to serve for eighteen months, which meant their enlistment would expire on December 31, 1776.

During a bitterly cold November 1776, Washington led his worn-out Continental soldiers across New Jersey and into Pennsylvania. He wanted to use the Delaware River as a natural defense against any British attacks.

These Americans were truly bedraggled. Their army uniforms were mostly makeshift clothing—whatever the men already owned. Some men had worn out their only pair of shoes. They strapped rags around their feet to protect their bare skin from snow and ice. Other men had no tents for shelter and no blankets for warmth.

Charles Willson Peale, a famous artist, traveled to see Washington's force in Pennsylvania. Peale was shocked by the army's condition.

"A man staggered out of line and came toward me," Peale later recalled. "He had lost all his clothes. He was in an old, dirty blanket jacket. His beard long and his face full of sores ..."

Peale did not recognize this ravaged man—until he spoke. It was his brother, James!

In late November, the British government twisted the war knife.

They offered the colonists amnesty—which was like a full pardon for all "crimes" against King George.

This offer was significant. Many American rebels faced execution—a death sentence—for “treason” against England. But if they would sign an oath of loyalty to the King, their “crimes” would be pardoned.

Thousands of Americans accepted this offer, including some wealthy colonial congressmen.



“Thomas Paine, Esqr., The spirit of the American Revolution.”

But Patriot Thomas Paine saw things differently. In the early stages of this rebellion, Paine wrote a pamphlet titled *Common Sense*. His powerful words fired up the Patriot movement.

Now, as the Continental Army was facing possible destruction, Paine wrote another pamphlet. He directed his words at every despairing American, anyone who felt ready to surrender and give up this fight for freedom.

“These are the times that try men’s souls,” Paine wrote. “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. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.”

Paine’s soaring words lifted the morale of American rebels, especially the men in Washington’s army.

While Washington moved his men across New Jersey and into Pennsylvania, he was pursued by British General Howe and his forces. By early December 1776, Howe was close enough to cross the Delaware River, and his well-fed, fully supplied soldiers could’ve wiped out the suffering American fighters.

But on December 13, 1776, Howe decided to halt the chase, allowing his men to rest and resupply. Howe himself set up quarters in New Brunswick, New Jersey. As a precaution to protect Trenton, he placed Hessian troops at different posts along the Delaware River.

With the enemy at his doorstep, Washington was desperate. And desperate times call for desperate measures.

Washington needed to take action in a way that was so daring, so aggressive, so unthinkable that his army might—*might*—beat the enemy.

Washington decided to launch a surprise attack on the British.

When?

Christmas Day!

The Hessians defending Trenton were under the command of British Colonel Johann Rall. Trenton was then a tiny village with about 100 homes and no solid fortifications. Yet Rall felt very confident of his situation, especially with the Hessian force of about 1,500 men. Although his officers said the Continentals might attack them, Rall replied, “Let them come ... we will go at them with the bayonet.”



German Colonel Johann Rall.

But some British Loyalists arrived in Trenton and told Rall that Washington's troops were indeed planning an attack—at some point. Nobody knew when. Rall then asked his higher-ups for reinforcements.

His request was denied.

Unbeknownst to Rall and his officers, Washington had also dispatched a spy into Trenton. The spy was a man named John Honeyman. His mission was to enter Trenton and pretend to be a British Loyalist, then convince the Hessians that Washington's army was finished—flat broke, confused, starving, exhausted, and so disorganized that the American soldiers couldn't even attack a fly.

On December 24, the Hessians started celebrating Christmas Eve. They played musical instruments, sang songs, danced, and drank a lot of wine and beer. They were having a very good time.

Washington, meanwhile, was preparing to launch the Durham boats.



Washington prepares to cross the Delaware.

Durham boats were sort of like floating freight wagons, measuring anywhere from 25 to 65 feet long and about eight feet wide. Their bottoms were flat, and the insides were shallow. That construction allowed the Durham boats to float on as little as two or three feet of water. Also, the boats were double-ended—either end could unload men and supplies, making it unnecessary to turn the boat around to invade land. Sometimes Durham boats were fitted with sails, but they could also be rowed or “poled” as men walked a narrow deck ledge and drove a pole into the water to push the boat forward.

Washington placed Colonel Henry Knox—remember him from Bunker Hill?—in charge of moving the Durham boats across the Delaware River. The boats would carry infantry, horses, and cannons to the other side in the dark of night.

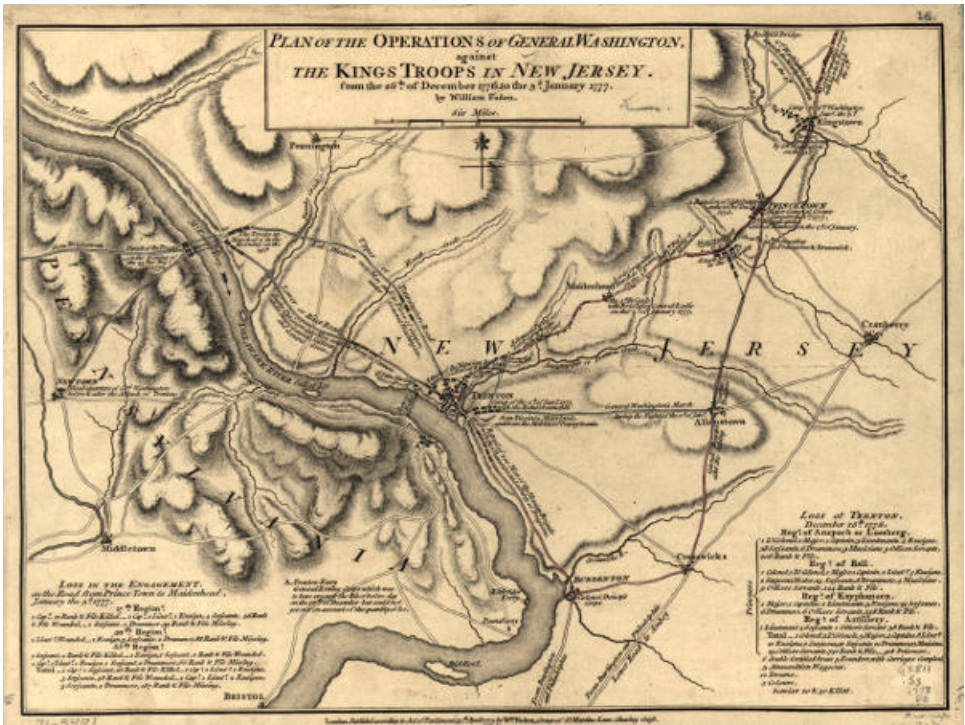
This mission was near impossible. The wicked winter weather only grew worse as the men launched the Durham boats. Temperatures hovered around 30 degrees, and a freezing wind

blew ice needles into the men’s eyes. Hands and fingers froze on the oars and poles. Chunks of ice choked the water and clonked into the wooden boats.

“It blew a hurricane,” one soldier later recalled.

The weather was so terrible that it blocked two of Washington’s forces from crossing the water. Only Washington’s main force—about 2,400 men—managed to cross the Delaware.

At 4 a.m. on Christmas morning, Washington began his secret march for Trenton, about ten miles away.



Historical map of Washington’s march from Princeton (upper right) to Trenton (center). The Delaware River snakes between New Jersey (right) and Pennsylvania (left).

Throughout this trek, civilian volunteers supportive of the American rebels helped guide these Continental soldiers down New Jersey’s dark and winding roads. Washington himself rode up and down the line on his horse, encouraging his men—some of

whom marched barefoot and left red splotches of blood on the icy ground.

As they neared Trenton, Washington split his main force into three groups. Washington himself would command one group, while Major General Nathanael Greene's men would attack Trenton from the north. A third group, under Major General Sullivan, would attack Trenton from the west.

But soon after this split, a messenger reached Washington with bad news. The miserable wet weather had soaked the gunpowder in Sullivan's group.

Wet gunpowder cannot be fired.

Washington sent a message back: "Tell General Sullivan to use the bayonet. I am resolved to take Trenton."

Around 8 a.m. on Christmas Day, Washington and his army were about a mile outside Trenton when Rall's forward outposts spotted them.

"Der Fiend!" cried the Hessians.

Translated, that meant: "The enemy!"



Washington's men face off with Hessians at the Battle of Trenton.

The Americans opened fire with three volleys—all guns firing three times in a row.

The outpost Hessians—still recovering from their late-night partying—fired back with a volley of their own. And they soon realized this wasn't just some skirmish. This was a full-fledged assault!

The Hessians retreated in an orderly fashion, firing as they moved back. They met up with other Hessians behind them and yelled, "The Americans are attacking!"

The Hessians slipped into Trenton houses for cover. That shift opened up a road leading to the town of Princeton.

Washington sent men to block the road. He would have no enemies escaping this battle.

Washington's artillery set up weapons on Trenton's high ground, known as King and Queen Streets. The Americans now had a full view of the Hessians' movements.

Ba-boom!

The Battle of Trenton launched into its next phase.

Other regiments of Hessians—all of whom had celebrated too much the night before—hurried to prepare for this fight. And Colonel Rall also was just waking up in his quarters.

Rall ordered his men to King and Queen Streets. He planned to advance on the Americans, capture their cannons, and take the high ground.

Washington ordered the cannons to open fire on the approaching Hessians.

Artillery explosions blasted through the Christmas air. Walls shook inside Trenton's houses. Heavy gun smoke clouded the streets. The battle raged on. The Americans were holding back the Hessians.

But Rall still felt confident about his experienced soldiers.

He ordered another attack on the American cannons.

The Hessians were met by one volley after another—both cannon and rifle fire.

Washington's men took the initiative and moved forward, firing on the houses where the Hessians were hiding. In this attack, the Americans' relentless fire pushed the German mercenaries further and further back until it was a Hessian retreat.

Rall ordered two cannons forward. He would fight fire with fire.

But this action was too little too late.

The American cannons bore down full force, and Rall's cannons only managed to fire off a few rounds before Washington's gun crew had killed almost all of Rall's gun crew.

Taking advantage of the faltering enemy, Washington pressed forward again. The Americans even captured Rall's cannons—then turned the barrels on the Hessians!

Over on Queen Street, Rall's men tried to advance, but the blistering shots of muskets and cannons forced them into yet another retreat.

Seeing little chance for victory in this battle, one group of Hessians fled into an open field. American Colonel John Stark led a bayonet charge in another part of town and roused out still more Hessians.

And now, the brilliance of Washington's decision to block the road to Princeton was revealed.

The enemy had no escape.

However, the Battle of Trenton wasn't over.

In that open field, Rall tried to rally his remaining men.

In those days, musicians traveled with the army. The drummer kept a marching beat; buglers translated orders, including a signal for morning rise and launching an attack.



Example of a drummer boy in battle.

Rall wanted one last charge to take Trenton. He ordered his musicians to play some uplifting music to raise his men's morale.

Washington watched every movement as it unfolded.

When Rall's men pushed forward, Washington ordered his forces into battle formations. With the excellent covering positions of the cannons on high ground, the Americans fired on Rall's men from three different directions.

Although some Hessians managed to retake one cannon on King Street, Knox saw them preparing to use it and ordered his

men off the position. Regrouping after a brief firefight, Knox's men retook that cannon—and once again turned it on the Hessians!

The unending and all-out attack scattered the Hessians from the battlefield. During the retreat, Rall was wounded and died of his injuries.

Seeing the Hessians on the run, Washington didn't let up.

"March on, my brave fellows," he yelled, "after me!"

In a nearby orchard, the Americans surrounded the Hessians. Washington offered terms of surrender, and the Hessians accepted.

The Battle of Trenton was over.

The Americans had won—very, very decisively.

About twenty-two Hessians were killed, including Rall. Another eighty-three men were wounded. And about 900 were captured by the Americans.

The Americans lost two Continental Army soldiers killed in action. Five men were wounded.

Winning the Battle of Trenton lifted the American army's morale. They also gained cannons, guns, ammunition, flour, meat, shoes, boots, and bedding—plus the enemy's horses, which would help both in battle and in moving the army's supplies from place to place.

The Battle of Trenton also eased Washington's enlistment problem.

Rather than abandoning a defeated Continental Army, more men signed up to fight with the American commander who had launched such a stunning and brilliant surprise attack on the British.

But the Revolutionary War was far from over.

In fact, after this battle, the British retook Trenton.

Washington pressed on.

WHO FOUGHT?

THE MARBLEHEADERS



The Marbleheaders rowing Washington in a Durham boat across the icy Delaware River. The boat behind them carries horses and artillery.

General George Washington is rightly recognized as the leader who crossed the Delaware River on Christmas Eve, 1776.

But do you know who transported him across that icy river?

The Marbleheaders.

The Marbleheaders hailed from Marblehead, Massachusetts, about fifteen miles north of Boston.

Rough-hewn men, they were experienced mariners and fishermen who made their living from the sea.

Before the American Revolution, Marblehead was one of the most active ports in all of the colonies. Men grew rich trading

goods and dispatching ships carrying goods back and forth across the ocean.

But the leaders of Marblehead, such as Elbridge Gerry, broke with England over King George's unfair actions.

Even before the Revolution broke out, the Marbleheaders were seizing British ships and establishing their own colonial supply lines.

Many Marbleheaders fought in the early battles of the Revolution, including at Lexington and Bunker Hill. Hundreds signed up as Continental soldiers and fought with Washington at the Battles of Long Island and Trenton.

It was the experience of seafaring men of Marblehead who got Washington across the Delaware that night. And after beating the British at Trenton, these same Marbleheaders rowed Washington and the Continental soldiers back across the Delaware—only this time they were carrying about 900 Hessian prisoners, too.

Marbleheaders were known for their attire: leather boots, vests, and trousers. But they were a highly diverse group. Some of the men were White, others Black or Hispanic, and even Native American. However, all of them fought together as one unit. Skin color did not divide them. (This diversity is even more remarkable considering it would be another 150 years before the U.S. Army integrated—put together units of—different races.)

Like many Continental soldiers, the Marbleheaders enlisted for eighteen months. When that period expired, most Marbleheaders returned home to Massachusetts, where they continued to harass British ships. Only a few stayed with Washington.

Despite their short service, the Marbleheaders became a legendary unit because of their discipline, courage, and strength—and, of course, for being the men who transported Washington across the Delaware on a cold, dark, and stormy Christmas Eve.

Modern military historian Patrick O'Donnell researched the Marbleheaders for several years. He wrote an excellent book about

these men, titled *The Indispensables: The Diverse Soldier-Mariners Who Shaped the Country, Formed the Navy, and Rowed Washington Across the Delaware*.

“Indispensable” means “absolutely necessary.”

The Marbleheaders were absolutely necessary to the American Revolution.

If Washington had not crossed the Delaware that night, the entire army could’ve been killed or captured. And the Revolution would be finished.

BOOKS

The Crossing: How George Washington Saved the American Revolution by Jim Murphy. A highly rated retelling of Washington’s courageous journey.

INTERNET

The series *Liberty’s Kids* explains American history with cartoons, but it takes a serious look at significant historical events, including the American Revolution. [youtube.com/watch?v=t2BkcZm-JAM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2BkcZm-JAM)

MOVIES

The Crossing (2000) is a historical drama made for television starring Jeff Daniels as George Washington.

Get the rest of the book at GreatBattlesForBoys.Com and Amazon!

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