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The Battle of Trenton: The Most Impactful Christmas in the History of the United States

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Abstract

The paper considers the elements that were necessary for the Battle of Trenton to be successful and also the impact that the battle had on the remainder of the war. There is little doubt in my mind that without the Battle of Trenton the British would have won the Revolutionary War. It is George Washington's skill as a leader and elaborate use of strategy and even spying that helped the Continental Army to secure victory at Trenton. The paper discloses the way that Colonials perceived Washington and also delves into the aspect of Nathanael Greene's impact at the battle and then interprets how each leader, Washington and Greene, benefited from the battle. I also tried to make it known that the civilians in the area had viewed the British and Colonial armies from different perspectives.

There are few scenes in the history of any country that are able to so aptly generalize and accentuate the feelings and emotions of that country in one picture. The image of George Washington Crossing the Delaware is an image that does just that for Americans. The bold, strong and stoic Washington is at the bow of his small boat, standing firmly and unwavering in the cold December wind. The painting *Washington's Crossing* by German-American painter Emmanuel Leutze is maybe the most famous image in American history.



Washington Crossing the Delaware by Emanuel Leutze, 1851

This painting is one that many Americans see in school, and one that most Americans will know at least something about, but the story behind this painting is far more important. Washington's crossing of the Delaware is a pivotal point in American history; it is one of the few places where, had the American side been unsuccessful, there would most likely not be an America today. Washington's crossing and the following Battle of Trenton helped to turn the tide of the

American Revolution, but there are many aspects of this battle that are unknown to the average citizen. The amount of planning and quiet cooperation that went into this action is nearly unknown and knowing more about it changes what seems like an impulsive maneuver into the well thought strategy of a military genius. There were other historically significant figures at the Battle of Trenton, a fact that hardly anyone knows. This underscores how much of a giant George Washington truly is as he overshadows everyone else who was present. The historical significance of the Battle of Trenton is also an aspect that goes seemingly unnoticed because, as I mentioned early, without a victory at Trenton, the war would have likely been lost.

The history of United States is short compared to that of other large world powers; the immaturity of the United States, that being said, how young the United States is compared to other countries may be why some characters, like George Washington, are more connected to the country than other figures are connected to the histories of their countries. This essay will focus on George Washington and arguably the most important event in his political and martial life. During this essay I will explain why the Battle of Trenton is such an important event in George Washington's life, due to the impact that it had on his career and the impact that it had on the United States as a whole.

George Washington is one of the most colorful characters from the Revolutionary and pre-Revolutionary period of American History. Washington is first seen in the French and Indian War fighting for England against the French. It is here that he gains leadership skills and becomes versed in the art of war while serving in the British army. It is his involvement in the French and Indian War that helps to establish the character and skill of a young George Washington.

The paper aims to discern the impact that the Battle of Trenton had on the Revolutionary War by examining primary sources, mainly letters or diary entries of those involved in the Battle of Trenton. The main historical figures whose viewpoints will be examined are Nathanael Greene and George Washington. This is due to the fact that they were higher educated, led the Battle, are figures who are generally considered to have historical significance, and they are seen as reliable sources.

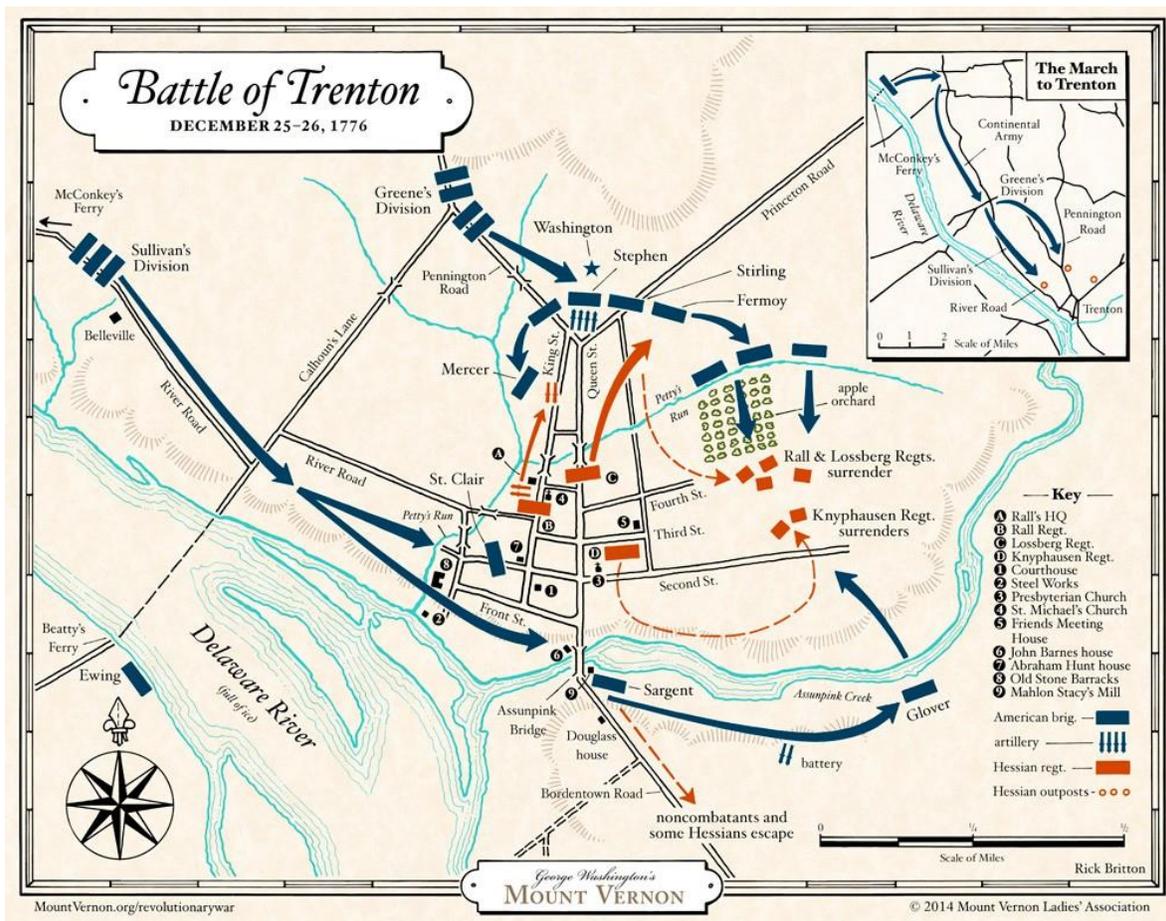
The amount of preparation that goes into events of such monumental historical significance can often be overlooked. It is apparent from Washington's notes and letters that he was moving forces into proper position as much as two weeks in advance of his planned attack on Trenton. Washington was giving orders to Brigadier General Philemon Dickinson and others to take necessary measures to secure important ferries and to find locations that would be good for fording the Delaware River (Washington 305). Washington knew the value of controlling who was allowed to cross the river, and he knew if he could control the Delaware River, especially in the area around Trenton, then he could essentially control the flow of people and information from the North into New Jersey and all the way down into Philadelphia. Washington was also smart enough to only send information about the initial movements of his plan, to avoid any information being stolen. Although he never states this, it is easy to infer that he only relayed information about plans that the enemy would be able to easily anticipate or easily see through. The Delaware River was an important area, due to its access to Philadelphia and the surrounding area, so the British could easily expect troop movements in and around the Trenton area. What was unexpected, as history proves, was the idea of a return attack on Christmas night, at a time when the weather was very inhospitable. Washington lost more men to the cold as they moved along the Delaware River than he did during the actual fighting that occurred (Fischer 406).

The Battle of Trenton took place on December 26th, 1776, but the plan was put in action on Christmas night. Washington devised a plan to cross the Delaware River with over five-thousand men. The icy conditions on the River, however, forbade almost three-thousand of Washington's men from crossing (Washington 442). Washington still went forward with his plan, and early in the morning of December 26th, he took approximately one-thousand and five hundred Hessian mercenaries by surprise. Losses were minimal on both sides, but the victory gave the Colonial army a new sign of hope, a sign that some believed helped to win the war.

One aspect of this battle that is often overlooked is the hardships that these men faced. There are many stories of soldiers being forced to walk long distances, row boats, and tread freezing water, while only wearing a light jacket and not even having boots. Many men are known to have simply wrapped their feet in cloth to do whatever they could to fight off the cold. This led to many men losing finger, toes, hands and feet to frostbite. In fact, more Colonial soldiers died from the elements than did during the fighting that occurred at Trenton. At least two men are said to have died from exposure to the elements on their way to Trenton, while no Colonials are reported to have died during the fighting. The sheer strength of the Colonial soldiers is formidable at worst and simply astounding at best. It is easy to believe that, to fight through such horrid conditions that the men who served under Washington must have been much more disciplined than the British gave them credit for, and were most certainly fighting for a cause that they believed in.

It is important to understand the conditions that Washington was facing during December of 1776. The Colonial government was in complete disarray, as the chances of victory looked slim in their eyes. Washington was under immense pressure, both from his peers and from politicians. If he couldn't find success soon, it was likely that he would be forced to turn over

control of the Continental Army to someone else. Washington, however, had faith in his strategies, but knew he needed to prove that he was still an able leader. He gathered information and devised a plan. He first made contact with the Hessian force and, after a brief skirmish, signaled a retreat. He then, according to journals and Hessian sources, planted disinformation. Washington “released” a loyalist, who returned to the Hessians. He claimed he escaped the Colonials and that they had ordered a full retreat and would not be coming back to Trenton (Kilmeade and Yaeger 29). The Hessians saw this as a chance to settle down and celebrate Christmas, and what better way to celebrate than with fortuitous amounts of alcohol. Washington



knew that he would be able to catch the Hessians unaware and possibly intoxicated, which is exactly what happened on December 26th.

Map of the Battle of Trenton (Mount Vernon Ladies' Association)

Washington, around the end of 1776, was beginning to receive immense pressure to begin winning battles, or to at least stop losing as many battles as he was losing. This was to be expected from the politicians who were backing him. All of the founders who had signed the Declaration of Independence had essentially signed their lives away. If Washington wasn't successful, King George would (quite literally) have all of their heads. It may have been this mounting pressure that forced Washington to finally make a move of his own at Trenton. We see often that Washington is often portrayed as a brave, stoic leader which may have led to this maneuver. It is almost certain that if the crossing of the Delaware had backfired that the war for independence would have simply ended. Without anyone left to back him, and no victories to show for his effort, Washington would have looked a fool, and would have most likely been stripped of his title as leader of the Continental Army.

It is important to look at the numbers to really understand just how successful Washington was in his surprise attack on the Hessian forces on Christmas of 1776. The American forces numbered over 5,000 and received only 7 recorded casualties. The Hessian side was much smaller, a mere 1,500, but suffered over 100 dead or wounded and had nearly 1,000 men captured. This means that Washington was able to incapacitate over seventy percent of the Hessian force. The Americans hadn't experienced a victory of this magnitude in months, and defeating such expertly trained and armed forces like the Hessian mercenaries would have been a huge boost to the morale of the Colonial Army.

George Washington was not the only American commander at the Battle of Trenton. While Washington receives all the credit, and the front seat on the row boat, Nathanael Greene was also present during the Battle of Trenton. Nathanael Greene may be the second best known

American commander from the period of the American Revolution. Known mostly for his performance in the Southern Colonies later in the war, it is important to note that Greene was vying for Washington's position as leader of the Continental Army, and that a failure on Washington's part would have likely created enough pressure that it would have caused Washington to lose his job. Greene, however, received no credit for assisting Washington in the battle. Greene believed that he should be leading the Continental Army at this point in time. He saw Washington's lack of success as reason enough for a change in command, but the victory at Trenton dashed most of the hopes that Greene had of leading the Continental Army.

The effect of the victory at Trenton had truly far-reaching effects. Not only did it raise morale around the colonies, but it also began to put pressure on the British to end the war. What had initially been seen in the eyes of the British as a rebellion that would quickly be quelled was beginning to look like the colonies had more fight than had initially been anticipated. Furthermore, the Revolutionary War was very costly for the British. Hiring mercenaries and shipping in soldiers and supplies from Britain was an expensive task, one that was continually adding up. This increasing cost along with global pressures from stronger, more prominent powers on the European continent began to weigh the British down. The British Hegemony was beginning to lose ground slowly but surely to the ungrateful colonies in the New World.

The Battle of Trenton was not only important to the history of the United States, but also to the permanent procurement of Washington's place as the leader of the Continental Army. Washington's journals and private papers are filled with outgoing and incoming letters talking about the events and significance of the Battle of Trenton for days following the battle. Washington received numerous letters from his subordinates, but he was especially sure to write to John Hancock. To Hancock he wrote,

“I have the pleasure of congratulating you on the Success of an Enterprize, which I formed against a detachment of the Enemy lying in Trenton, and which was executed yesterday Morning” (Washington 454).

Washington received numerous letters from founding fathers and the like, all of which praised him for his genius in using his forces to defeat an enemy as highly trained and respected as Hessian mercenaries.

Nathanael Greene, on the other hand, wrote few letters about his victory at Trenton. In fact, the only person to whom he wrote was his wife, Catherine, and he didn't write her until four days after the battle had been won. Greene was extremely modest when writing about his participation, choosing instead to write on the significance of the event as a whole. Greene wrote that,

“This is an important period to America, big with great events. God only knows what will be the issue of this Campaign, but everything wears a much better prospect than they have for some weeks past” (Greene 377).

Comparing the moods of the two American leaders – Washington and Greene – gives a new and different view to both of the men. For maybe the first time ever, Washington seems to be more of a braggart, where Greene appears to be a humble servant of his country. While Washington's writings are not what we would consider bragging by modern standards, I simply mean that the ever honest and trustworthy George Washington, father of the United States, seems to be pressing his success while Greene appears more content to simply accept his role as a supporting character of the revolution. Whatever the facts may be, Washington obviously still saw the ability in Greene both as a leader and a strategist, and these two abilities were also noticed by the other leaders of the revolution. Greene's willingness to accept his role and to do as

others saw fit of him may have been what led him to receiving control of the southern front of the war. Without the humble Greene by his side, George Washington would still most likely have had success at Trenton. However, it is extremely unlikely in my eyes that Washington would have been able to win the war without the knowledge and expertise of Nathanael Greene by his side. It seems that Washington's reward for the victory was recognition, Greene's reward for loyalty was advancement, and the infantry's reward was simply more rum (Washington 453).

Unbeknownst to most Americans, Washington is partially responsible for the creation of America's first spy ring. Washington started what is referred to as the Culper Spy Ring. According to authors Brian Kilmeade and Don Yaeger, this spy ring was an essential part in the Revolutionary Army defeating the British. This spy ring wasn't officially created until 1778, but there are a number of events that take place before 1778 that led up to its formal creation. For instance, a butcher in Trenton was "captured" by the Colonials, who "accidentally" allowed him to escape back to Trenton. He then went back across the river and informed the Hessian force that he had escaped the Colonials and that they were fleeing to safety, and there was no way that they would be returning that night. The Hessians, having it on good authority that the butcher was a trustworthy loyalist, took the man's word and allowed themselves to properly enjoy Christmas. The butcher then fled Trenton that night, seemingly unnoticed by the Hessians. Washington used this disinformation to help in his efforts to surprise the Hessian forces at Trenton and to help claim a decisive victory. While this is an early and fairly simple use of spying and disinformation, it is crucial because of the outcome of the Battle of Trenton. Had the Hessians not been so sure that they would be safe for the night, they would have likely not celebrated so heavily and would have most likely left an ample amount guards out to keep watch. Washington's use of spies in a war that was mainly fought between neighbors was a crucial part

of his success, and may have even been a major contributor to his victory in the American Revolution.

The idea that misinformation may have played a more critical role than anyone previously thought in the Battle of Trenton is a theory that may be more credible than anyone previously believed. According to authors Brian Kilmeade and Don Yaeger, there is good reason to believe that American espionage originated around the beginning of the Revolutionary War. According to the authors, a Scots-Irish immigrant name John Honeyman handed the Hessian forces a vital lie. Honeyman told the Hessian leader, a Colonel Johann Rall, that the American troops were “so disheartened and bedraggled” (Kilmeade and Yaeger 29). And that they [the Americans] had, “no plans of advancing anytime soon” (Kilmeade and Yaeger 29). Allegedly, Washington had captured and interrogated Honeyman and convinced him (in one way or another) to return to the Hessian forces and feed them lies about the American’s plans. Honeyman was seen as a trusted British citizen, one that had served the crown loyally during the French and Indian War, and one who would not betray his country during a time of war. Whatever Washington did, it was obviously persuasive, and may have been an integral part in turning the tide of the American Revolution.

The fact of the matter is that George Washington was embarking on a mission that many thought would be unsuccessful, and about which he himself was doubtful about. Washington, in a letter to Colonel John Cadwalader said that:

“Notwithstanding the discouraging Accounts I have received from Col: Reed of what might be expected from the Operations below, I am determined, as the night is favourable, to cross the River, & make the attack upon Trenton in the Morning. If you

can do nothing real, at least create as great a diversion as possible. I am sir your most obt servant” (439).

Washington was obviously doubtful about the outcome of his attack on Trenton. It is easy to see just how desperate Washington was becoming. Not only was he willing to attack a force that he knew had superior training and equipment, but he was willing to do so on Christmas morning.

While many may recall the phrase “all is fair in love and war”, it is still one of few engagements to be had on the birthday of Jesus Christ in a time when atheism was persecuted, and non-Christians were scorned.

While everyone is aware of the outcome of the Battle of Trenton, few now what took place and how the battle developed. Luckily, an officer on George Washington’s staff wrote a detailed account of the battle and it has survived to this day. The officer gives a detailed account of the arrival of the continental army and how the events played out that morning. According to this unnamed officer:

“It was broad daylight when we came to a house where a man was chopping wood. He was very much surprised when he saw us. “Can you tell me where the Hessian picket is?” Washington asked. The man hesitated, but I said, “You need not be frightened, it is General Washington who asks the question.” His face brightened and he pointed toward the house of Mr. Howell. It was just 8 o’clock. Looking down the road I saw a Hessian running out from the house. He yelled in Dutch [German] and swung his arms. Three or four others came out with their guns. Two of them fired at us, but the bullets whistled over our heads. Some of General [Adam] Stephen’s men rushed forward and captured two. The other took to their heels, running toward Mr. [Alexander] Calhoun’s house, where the picket guard was stationed, about twenty men under Captain Altenbrockum. They came running out of the house. The Captain flourished his sword and tried to form his men. Some of them fired at us, others ran toward the village. The next moment we heard drums beat and a bugle sound, and then from the west came the boom of a cannon. General Washington’s face lighted up instantly, for he knew that it was one of Sullivan’s guns. We could see a great commotion down toward the meeting-house, men running here and there, officers swinging their swords, artillerymen harnessing their horses. Captain [Thomas] Forrest unlimbered his guns. Washington gave the order to advance, and rushed on the junction of King and Queen streets. ... We saw Rall come riding up the street from his headquarters, which were at Stacy Potts’ house. We could hear him shouting in Dutch, “My brave soldiers, advance.” His men were frightened and confused,

for our men were firing upon them from fences and houses and they were falling fast. Instead of advancing they ran into an apple orchard. The officers tried to rally them, but our men kept advancing and picking off the officers. It was not long before Rall tumbled from his horse and his soldiers threw down their guns and gave themselves up as prisoners” (William S. Styker).

It seems strange that the Colonial Army could make the fierce Hessian force run in fear as they (allegedly) did. It is often best to take historical accounts like this one with a grain of salt, as there is often some embellishment that takes place. This may have been written to impress family or to try to overemphasize the officer’s involvement in the battle. It is, however, safe to take most of the account for face value. It is safe to say that the Hessians did, in fact, retreat to an orchard and that there were failed attempts to rally them. Nonetheless, this is an important account as it comes from someone who wasn’t of elite status, therefore it is safe to assume that they had little to gain in writing this account, except to maybe impress a few family members or to inform neighbors of Washington’s victory at Trenton.

Now that we have seen the military side of the conflict, it is important to exam how noncombatants perceived the war. One of the best views that we have of this war is that of Margaret Hill Morris. Morris was a widow who lived in Burlington. She witnessed acts of malice from all sides: Colonial, Hessian, Tory, and British. Morris gives numerous accounts throughout her journal. None of the entries talk about the Battle of Trenton specifically, but the entries give a genuine view of the civilian perspective of the war. For instance, just days before the battle, Morris noted Hessian movements around the town she wrote that,

“24th.... Several Hessians in Town to day — They went to Dan Smiths and enquired for several articles in the Shop, which they offerd to pay for — 2 were observed to be in liquor in the Street, they went to the Tavern, & calling for Rum orderd the Man to Charge

it to the King— we hear that 2 houses in the Skirts of the Town were broke open & pillaged by the Hessions.”

The genuine, unbiased view of the Hessian forces and how they treated civilians brings great light to how those who lived in the colonies would've viewed the occupation of a completely foreign force.

Morris, however, made similar notes about Colonial atrocities as well. Noting mainly that people were willing to turn on their neighbors during times of war. Morris claimed that:

“13th [December 1776] ...the spirit of the Divil still continued to rove thro the Town in the shape of Tory Hunters...some of the Gentlemen who entertained the foreigners were pointed out to the Gondola Men — 2 Worthy inhabtants were seizd upon & dragd on board ... Parties of Armd Men rudely enterd the Houses in Town, & diligent search made for Tories, the 2 last taken releasd & sent on Shore — some of the Gondola Gentry broke into & pillagd R Smiths House on the bank” (Morris).

Morris was well aware that the Colonials as well as the British were committing heinous crimes and wrongly imprisoning those who had done no wrong. This account happens less than two weeks before the Battle of Trenton and gives us a bias free look into what was really happening in New Jersey during the Revolutionary War.

The American Revolution is a war that defined the culture of the United States. It is a revolution whose effects have impacted countries across seas and is still impacting the world today. It was a war which based itself on the principles of enlightenment thinkers and looked to create a country in which all men are created equal. The American revolution couldn't have been successful had it not had the extraordinary men behind it that it was fortunate to have. The giants of American history, such as George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and many

other great American founders were critical in the establishment of the United States. More important than all of that, however, was the success of a seemingly last-ditch effort to surprise foreign mercenaries on Christmas morning. Had George Washington not boldly led a handful of undertrained, poorly equipped Americans to attack the superior Hessian force at Trenton and had George Washington not been successful in his attempt, one would be hard pressed to argue that the American Revolution could have continued at all, let alone that the Colonial Army could have released themselves from the grip of King George III. The underlying details of an event that is so important to, not only an entire war, but to an entire country often go unnoticed and unheard. There are so many miniscule details that helped to shape this event and helped to make the efforts of a seemingly outgunned and undertrained group of men use such genius military tact to surprise a superior force. Had all of these minor details not taken place, there may not have been an opportunity for George Washington to create an advantage, as small as it may have been, for himself. This could have easily led to his removal from leadership of the Continental Army, and then to the defeat of the colonists and the end of the American Revolution. The image that has been painted of the crossing of the Delaware, both literally and figuratively, is one of brave American soldiers risking their lives in the frigid conditions of the unforgiving Northeastern winter to defend their God-given rights and to help create a country that would hinge on revolutionary ideas.

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