

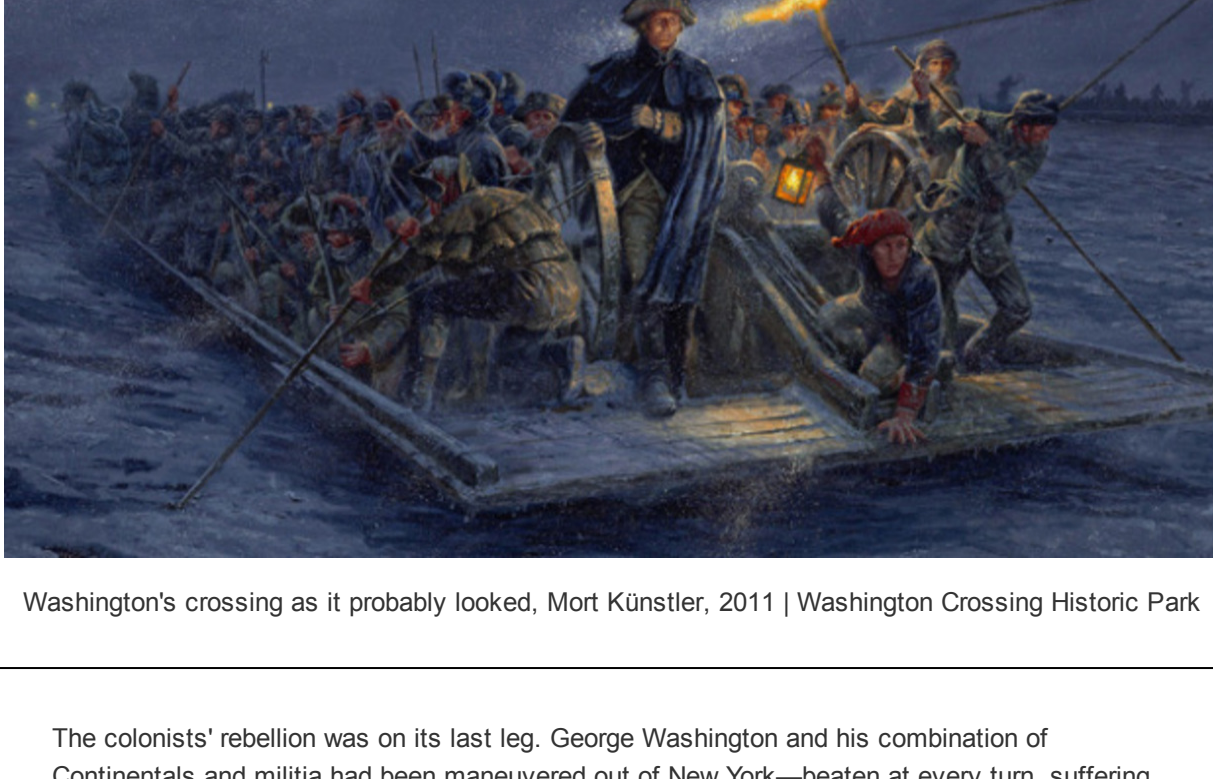


BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

Across the Delaware

Len Riedel, December 25, 2020

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Washington's crossing as it probably looked, Mort Künstler, 2011 | Washington Crossing Historic Park

The colonists' rebellion was on its last leg. George Washington and his combination of Continentals and militia had been maneuvered out of New York—beaten at every turn, suffering unacceptable casualties that melted the will of the men whom had been beaten at Brooklyn, pushed away from Kip's Bay on Manhattan Island, flanked out of positions, and compelled after White Plains to evacuate Manhattan. Gen. Nathaniel Greene's poor judgement had resulted in disaster at Fort Mifflin, and Fort Mifflin along the Palisades of New Jersey was vulnerable and would be evacuated.

Washington's failure was so absolute that not only was the morale of his army, if you could call it such, shattered, but his bonafides as the Commander in Chief of the primary Continental Army was being questioned, and rivals such as Charles Lee were in open opposition to his command decisions. Absent adequate supplies and provender, the continuation of the army as such was a real question.

British successes and pursuit across New Jersey resembled an English fox hunt. Augmented by hired mercenaries from the Germanic states, Hessian soldiers were a significant part of the British force in the Americas. As Washington distanced his melting force from a less-than-impressive pursuit, the weather closed in, suggesting an end to the campaigning season. Of course Washington knew even more importantly as he crossed the Delaware River into Pennsylvania that the second-generation Continental Army was about to dissolve at the end of 1776.



Replica Durham boats, Washington Crossing Historic Park | Barbara Noe Kennedy

With a river, at least temporarily, between Lord Cornwallis and Washington, the Continental Army encamped in expectation of consolidating its remaining detachments under Horatio Gates and Charles Lee. On the opposite shore, advanced encampments of Hessians were positioned a dozen or so miles from Washington's encampment. The administrative center of the British forces would be back in Princeton. Knowing the Delaware River might very well freeze over hard, Washington weighed the time he might potentially have to fall back to Philadelphia or beyond.

Washington had no sense as to whether he might be able to hold the army together beyond the end of the year. Militia had proven to be extraordinarily unreliable, coming and going as circumstances or whims might dictate. They were a unique force whose firepower was of dubious value when every musket would count. Only Continentals could be molded to do the commander's bidding, and the terms of their enlistments were set in writing—when they were done, they were gone unless they could be enticed to reenlist. Given the experiences in the winter of 1775–1776 around Boston, juxtaposed with the abject failures of arms in New York and the failure of the commissary and the Congress to provide clothing, food, and pay, the likelihood of reenlistments was slim.

Leadership has been a long-pondered construct that even today tends to defy firm definition. You only know leadership when you see it or experience it; but I would submit that what followed in December 1776 personified it. Washington determined to take his forces across the Delaware River to strike his enemy in their camps in Trenton on the day after Christmas at dawn's early light. As he saw his duty, he had no other choices.

Washington's plan involved crossing nearly 4,000 men including 2,400 under his direct observation in the dead dark of night, and executing a double envelopment movement that would entrap the Hessians at Trenton between the converging forces. In doing so, he would cut off the various routes of escape, acting quickly to complete the action before British soldiers encamped at Princeton could respond. Who would have thought it possible? An operation on Christmas night that must not be detected and which might be abjectly destroyed as his force straddled the Delaware River.

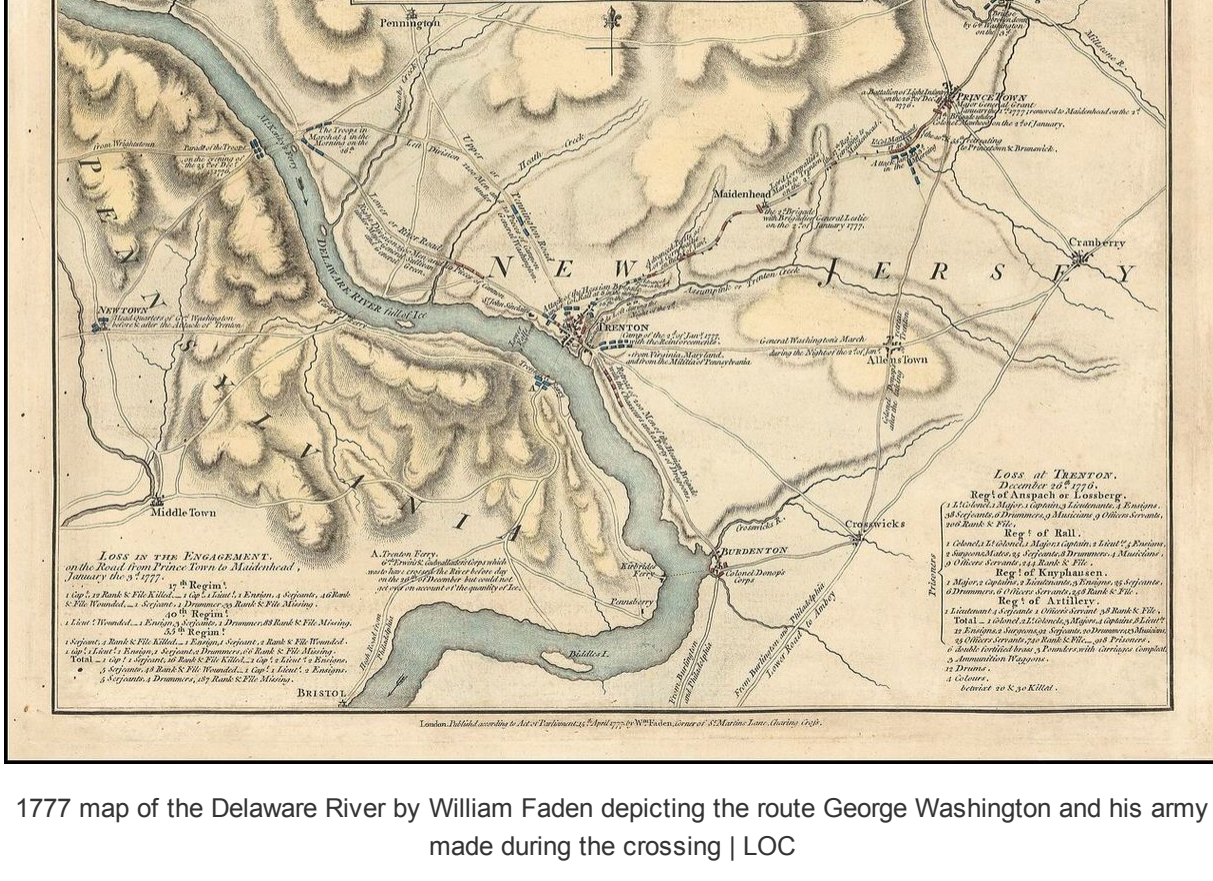


McConeky's Ferry Inn, where George Washington and his aides ate dinner and made plans for the crossing | creative commons

At the time you are receiving this, it is dead dark outside your house on the East Coast. It is tonight, December 25, 244 years ago, that the Hessians routinely patrolled the roads that approach Trenton. Washington knew he had to lock down the civilian populace to ensure his movement would not be reported by loyalists. The boats would have to move about 40 men at a time—with artillery, horses, and so forth. There was ice in the river, it was bitterly cold, soldiers whose enlistments would soon expire were poorly clad, and some were wearing the rawhides of beavers on their feet as a poor substitute for shoes. The men carrying them across the river were furmen from Marblehead under the command of John Glover. They would have to con the Durham boats across some 300 to 400 yards of a moving river, drop off their cargo, and return to the Pennsylvania shores to pick up more soldiers again and again until the entire operation was completed. It was to be done by midnight (7 hours), because Trenton is 9 miles distant from the ferry landing; it was finished after 3 a.m. (more than 10 hours). Then those men whose arms must have been screaming at them after 10 hours of nearly constant rowing took up arms and joined in the march to Trenton.

The dark of night was dark, and in the cold and precipitation the soldiers had to march at a pace of some 2 miles per hour, slipping and sliding, crossing frozen and wet flowing creeks, slipping down embankments, many getting bone-chilling wet. Washington's plans had, like so many plans tend to do, gone completely off the rails. The other two crossings had not happened for various reasons. Nonetheless, Washington had divided his forces to take the Pennington Road and the River Road, the former to come in above the town and to attack down the King and Queen Streets, while the River Road attackers would cut the Hessians off from crossing the Assumpink River, a significant stream that would permit an escape toward Princeton.

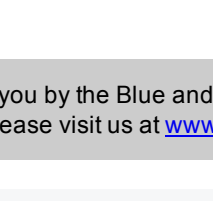
Washington had considered his opportunity and his likely conditions. As is likely you did today, he anticipated that the celebrations by the Hessians would have resulted in much merriment, consumption of alcohol, and lax discipline, as the soldiers slept off the revelry of the holiday. He was precisely correct. The Hessians were also slothful and slow of their responsibilities. A small detachment of Continentals silenced them. Then, as the dawning day emerged into morning, the Continentals moved across icy fields and placed their cumbersome but essential field artillery pieces in a commanding position above the town. The surprise was absolute, the victory total, and the price insignificant. The ramifications were monumental.



1777 map of the Delaware River by William Faden depicting the route George Washington and his army made during the crossing | LOC

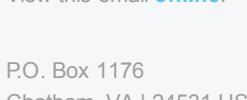
Washington could not afford to dawdle. British reinforcements already were en route. Now, however, he had to return to the crossing with his prisoners. By the end of the day on December 26, he was considering the next phase that was presented by the Trenton success. He planned to return to Trenton and from there to move against Princeton a week later. Generous bounties convinced enough Continentals to stay just 10 more days, and the Princeton success was a pass-through operation en route to winter quarters and a general reorganization at Morristown. Without this success, the Continental effort may well have died on the banks of the Delaware River in 1776.

I wanted to share this thought with you on this most sacred day to remind you of the sacrifices we ask of the most elite of all our citizens. Of course they are the military members deployed around the world, the soldiers and family members who have paid such a large price for our freedoms. I would also like to add to them those who are on duty as you read this—police officers, firemen, paramedics, and first responders. These are our greatest treasures, and it is a legacy that spans the generations of our history. Merry Christmas to them and all of you.



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