

# First Battle of Trenton

## Introduction

*The following tour is presented by the Trenton Historical Society with funding support from the New Jersey Historical Commission. Please begin this tour at the Trenton Battle Monument, located on the northern edge of downtown Trenton at the intersection of North Warren Street, North Broad Street, Pennington Avenue and Brunswick Avenue. Thank you for visiting Trenton and for your interest in the Battles of Trenton.*

By the middle of December 1776 it appeared that the American Revolution was all but over.

General George Washington and the Continental Army had suffered a series of stunning defeats in New York at Brooklyn Heights, Harlem Heights, Throgs Neck, White Plains, and Fort Mifflin and had been chased across New Jersey and into Pennsylvania by the British Army. Congress questioned Washington's ability to lead the Revolution. Washington's troops were demoralized and ill-equipped. If the Revolution was to survive, the Americans desperately needed a victory. Washington decided to risk everything in a surprise attack on Colonel Johann Rall's Hessian troops in the town of Trenton. Washington planned three separate but simultaneous movements across the Delaware River on Christmas night that would result in a convergent attack on Trenton before daybreak. But that night a violent winter storm pounded the Delaware Valley. Relentless snow, sleet and heavy ice thwarted all but one crossing. After battling sharp frost, high wind and heavy ice floes, only the force led by George Washington himself successfully crossed the Delaware at McConkey's Ferry – ten miles north of Trenton and three hours behind schedule. Without the assistance of the other two forces, Washington and his troops were on their own.

With daylight fast approaching the risk of proceeding was great, but Washington refused to turn back. As the General stood on the banks of the Delaware River watching his troops assemble in New Jersey, Benjamin Rush saw a piece of paper flutter to the ground from his hands. On it Washington had written the infamous words, "Victory or Death."

## 1. Battle Monument

Washington's plan for victory involved an attack on Trenton from the north and northwest. To this end he divided his troops as they approached the town, sending John Sullivan's First Division into town from the northwest to block any Hessian retreat over the Assunpink Creek. After skirmishing with Hessian troops on the Pennington Road about a mile north of Trenton, Nathaniel Greene's Second Division - with Washington in the lead - marched into Trenton and occupied the high ground where you are now standing.

Standing in this location one can still appreciate the strategic benefit this piece of ground held for Washington and the Continental Army in 1776. Then, as now, the main streets of Trenton converged at this point – though in 1776 Warren Street was called King Street and Broad Street was called Queen Street. Now partially obscured by modern buildings, in 1776 this vantage point provided Washington with a clear view of the town below, the Delaware River beyond, and the Assunpink Creek to his left. He could see Hessian regiments forming along King and Queen Streets in the center of town and closely watch their movements from there. This location also provided an ideal spot to set up the artillery that was vital to Washington’s battle plan. Stationed on this high ground, American artillery was able to send a stream of iron shot down King Street to overpower their Hessian counterparts.

The monument that stands before you was erected in 1893 in part to mark the location of this American artillery. Designed in the Beaux Arts style by architect John H. Duncan, the large column features a statue of George Washington, right arm outstretched, pointing toward the site of his victory at Trenton. Two continental soldiers flank the entrance to the monument. As you walk around the monument, look carefully at the cast bronze plaques, two of which were designed by painter Thomas Eakins and the third by sculptor Karl H. Niehouse. They depict Washington's army crossing the Delaware River, the opening of the Battle of Trenton, and the Hessian surrender. In order to preserve the plaques, the originals have been removed to the New Jersey State Museum and reproductions have been put in their place. If the monument is open today, please be sure to take a trip to the platform on top for a great view of the city of Trenton.

Note the memorial plaque dedicated to African American Revolutionary soldiers located just south of the Trenton Battle Monument. Dedicated in 2005, the plaque pays tribute to the nearly five thousand African Americans that fought for the Continental Army during the Revolution.

*Next, as you head south on the east side of Warren Street toward Bank Street, imagine what Trenton would have looked like in 1776. Remember, at the time of the Revolution, this was the main street of one of the most important market towns in New Jersey. This part of Warren Street was lined with one and a half to two story frame houses sitting on fenced-in quarter acre lots. Wealthier families typically built homes of stone or brick. Charles Axford Jr. ran the King of Prussia Tavern here, where Trentonians met for food, drink, political discussion and gossip.*

*At Bank Street cross to the west side of Warren Street and proceed south to St. Mary’s Church, the next stop on this tour.*

## **2. Colonel Rall’s Headquarters/English Church**

When Hessian soldiers garrisoned in the center of town heard the first round of firing on the heights above, they quickly assembled and marched up King Street. Their destination was Colonel Rall’s headquarters, located in Stacy Potts’ house which once stood here – on the present site of St. Mary’s Rectory. Here, upon the erroneous advice of a lieutenant

who reported that the Americans had surrounded the town, Colonel Rall made the fateful decision to attack the American positions rather than retreat. Thus, on December 26, 1776 this was the battlefield. Some of the heaviest fighting happened right here, in Trenton's streets – among houses, stores, and churches.

While Rall consulted with his lieutenants at his headquarters, American forces moved down the hill and entered the village through lots and alleys, assuming positions in houses and outbuildings. From inside the houses, the American infantry fired on the Hessians as the American artillery continued to fire from the high ground. Despite difficult conditions caused by the continuing winter storm, the Americans were fighting with a resolve the Hessians had not seen before.

In an effort to regroup, Colonel Rall led his troops out of the line of fire and rallied his infantry behind St. Michael's Church which is located across the street from where you now stand. From there, Rall's troops attempted an attack on the American flank but were rebuffed and thrown back into the streets of Trenton. A struggle broke out right here in front of Rall's headquarters where the Americans overtook the Hessians and captured two of the enemy's cannon. The sounds of battle echoed through the streets of Trenton - the heavy boom of artillery, the crash of shattering glass, the relentless roar of musketry and the cries of wounded soldiers. American Colonel Henry Knox wrote, "here succeeded a scene of war of which I had often conceived but never saw before. The hurry, fright and confusion of the enemy was [not] unlike that which will be when the last trump shall sound." Knox would later be promoted to Brigadier General on account of his actions here in Trenton.

Colonel Rall was one of many Hessian soldiers wounded during that fight. After he was hit twice, Rall's troops carried their wounded leader into St. Michael's Church, which had been closed during the Revolution on account of the mixture of Loyalist and Revolutionary convictions within the congregation.

The divided loyalties within the church were typical of Revolutionary Trenton. In 1776, there was by no means a political consensus within the community when it came to the Revolution. Many notable Trentonians adamantly supported the Revolution, just as many were staunchly loyal to the British Crown and for some, political opinions were easily swayed.

*Please continue south on the east side of Warren Street to the intersection of State Street, the community and commercial center of Revolutionary Trenton and the next stop on this tour.*

### **3. State and Warren**

In 1776, this intersection, of what were then known as King and Second Streets, was the commercial focus of Trenton. One of the town's markets operated here in King Street. Stores and homes of the town's most prominent merchants were located on the northwest

and southeast corners of the intersection and a tavern once operated on the southwest corner.

Today, the plaque in front of you marks the location of Abraham Hunt's house and store which in 1764 was described as "the most pleasant and best situated place for trade in the town." Abraham Hunt was the most prominent merchant in Trenton at the time of the Revolution, and in order to secure his position as such, he was sympathetic to those on both sides of the conflict. As commissioner of Hunterdon County, Hunt disbursed funds for the purchase of arms and weaponry for the Americans but during the Hessian occupation of Trenton, he traded with the Hessians as well. In fact, on the eve of the battle of Trenton, Hunt invited Colonel Rall to supper in his house which once stood here.

While Rall enjoyed a leisurely supper with Abraham Hunt, he received a warning that the Americans planned an imminent attack on Trenton. But Rall ignored the warning; a decision that would have dire consequences for the Hessian troops and Rall himself. The next day, as he lay dying of his wounds, Rall said of the note, "If I had read that at Mr. Hunt's I'd not be here." Perhaps if Rall had heeded the warnings of a looming American attack, he could have been better prepared to achieve a victory at Trenton. But instead by ten o'clock on the morning of December 26, Rall lay mortally wounded in St. Michael's Church as his men gathered on the east side of town to surrender.

*Please turn left onto State Street and walk one and a half blocks east on the north side of State Street to the Presbyterian Church, the next stop on this tour.*

#### **4. First Presbyterian Church**

After Colonel Rall was wounded, the Hessians retreated to an orchard on the east side of town and laid down their colors in surrender. The battle was over by ten o'clock that morning – in two hours the Americans had won a decisive victory. Twenty-two Hessian soldiers were killed, 83 were seriously wounded and the Americans captured 896 Hessian officers and men along with muskets, bayonets, ammunition, and swords. Of the American losses, General Washington wrote to Congress that they were "very trifling indeed, only two officers and one or two privates wounded." In reality, the toll of the battle at Trenton would prove to be far greater than Washington realized. An untold number of American soldiers died of starvation, exhaustion, exposure, and illness in the days leading up to and following the Trenton campaign.

After the battle, General Washington is said to have met the dying Colonel Rall. On his deathbed Rall implored Washington to treat the Hessian prisoners with humanity, a plea to which Washington willingly agreed. Rall died of his wounds that night and was buried somewhere here in the churchyard of the Presbyterian Church with other Hessian soldiers. The exact location of these interments has never been identified. Take note of the plaque installed on the front façade of the church building – it lists the names of

American soldiers who fought in the Revolution who are buried here. If the gate is unlocked, please take this opportunity to walk through the church yard.

The significance of the American victory at Trenton on December 26, 1776 can not be overstated. Prior to the Battle at Trenton, Washington had trouble recruiting and retaining an army as an American victory in the Revolution seemed nearly impossible. After the stunning victory here he had volunteers signing up in droves and many soldiers whose terms of service were nearing an end reenlisted. Morale soared and the Continental Army pursued the war effort with a renewed vigor. But the American Revolution was far from over. For at the close of the battle, Washington had an important decision to make: should the Americans attack again? hold their ground in Trenton? or retreat across the Delaware? Though Washington ultimately decided on a retreat across the Delaware River to Pennsylvania this would not be the last that General George Washington would see of Trenton, New Jersey.

*The members and Board of Trustees of the Trenton Historical Society thank you for taking this tour of Revolutionary Trenton which was produced by the Trenton Historical Society under a generous grant from the New Jersey Historical Commission.*

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## **Second Battle of Trenton**

### **Introduction**

On December 27, 1776 after winning a decisive victory against Hessian troops at Trenton, George Washington moved his army across the Delaware River into Pennsylvania. As he settled into his headquarters near Newtown, Bucks County, about twenty miles from Trenton, Washington celebrated the American victory but knew that he had provoked the enemy. A misstep at this crucial time could ruin the Revolution forever. Washington had a difficult decision to make. His troops had marched and fought for sixty hours in the snow and rain. Many were suffering from fever, consumption, and frostbite. Everyone was exhausted and the coldest weather still lay ahead. The risk of another winter campaign was great, but inaction was even more dangerous. With the assistance of his aides, Washington decided that another attack on Trenton was essential and ordered his troops to prepare for yet another crossing of the ice-strewn Delaware River. Meanwhile, General Lord Charles Cornwallis of the British Army had been looking forward to a trip home to England to see his wife, Jemima. In fact, on December 27 he had sent his baggage aboard the HMS Bristol. But after the disaster at Trenton, his leave was promptly cancelled and he was ordered to Princeton. A very unhappy Cornwallis took command of the British forces there on January 1, 1777. He had one clear mission: to find the American army and destroy it.

### **A. First Presbyterian Church**

Lord Cornwallis decided to mount an attack on Trenton from the north with a march straight down the King's Highway – roughly following the course of present day Route 206. On the morning of January 2, 1777 Cornwallis led an army of 9,000 men towards Trenton. Washington sent one thousand men and artillery to delay the British advance, buying him time to fall back from his position in town and establish a strong defensive position on the high ground south of the Assunpink Creek, about two blocks to the southeast of where you are now standing. With a series of skirmishes on the road to Trenton, Washington's army was indeed able to delay the British until four o'clock that afternoon.

The British arrived in Trenton just before sunset and the chase was on. The American forces headed for the bridge over the Assunpink to secure their position; the British and Hessian troops charged down King and Queen Streets in pursuit. As the soldiers fired feverishly at one another, the streets of Trenton were once again consumed by the sounds of battle.

The Americans suffered early casualties in the beginning of this, the Second Battle of Trenton. Look at the plaque on the façade of the Presbyterian Church. Beneath the name of Abraham Hunt you will see the name John Rosbrugh. Rosbrugh was a Presbyterian clergyman from Northampton County, Pennsylvania who at the age of sixty-three joined the army as chaplain of the Third Battalion of the Northampton County Militia. On January 2, 1777 he was caught by Hessian troops as they marched through Trenton. The Hessians followed their orders to take no prisoners - Rosbrugh's body was later found with thirteen bayonet wounds. John Rosbrugh was the first American clergyman to be killed in battle during the Revolution, and he is buried here in the First Presbyterian churchyard.

While furious fighting did occur in the streets of downtown Trenton, the bridge crossing the Assunpink Creek was the true focus of the Second Battle of Trenton and is the next stop on this tour. To reach the bridge, walk one half block west on East State Street to the intersection of Broad Street. Turn left on Broad Street and walk two blocks south.

## **B. Broad Street Bridge over the Assunpink**

Washington planned a strong defensive battle that centered on this bridge across the Assunpink Creek and the high ground to the south, though the landscape looked very different in 1777. Though a stone arch bridge did span the Assunpink here at the time of the Revolution, the core of the bridge that you are standing on today dates to the 19th century. At the time of the Second Battle of Trenton, the most important gristmill in the region operated on this creek and you can still see the mill's foundations on the south bank of the creek. In 1777, the lawn you see across the creek today was the site of a large pond that provided water power for the mill. Other than a few scattered houses, the high ground to the south of the creek was largely undeveloped.

Washington had learned the value of this piece of ground during the First Battle – it was an ideal location to set up artillery and cover the fords across the Assunpink. But it also

gave the Americans no choice but to win. The large slabs of ice that choked the Delaware prohibited any possible retreat across the river and a line of British soldiers were in position between the Americans and the rising ground to the north as well as to the rear in south Jersey. The fate of the Revolution rested on the American defense of this bridge. One American private wrote “On one hour, yes, on forty minutes, commencing at the moment when the British troops first saw the bridge and creek before them, depended the all-important, the all-absorbing question whether we should be independent States, or conquered rebels!”

The British made three attacks on this bridge. At about five o’clock in the evening, the British tried to cross the lower fords but were quickly rebuffed. Next, Hessian troops tried to storm the bridge. Shots rang out for twelve full minutes as the American artillery responded to Hessian fire. But the tenacious Hessian soldiers pushed forward, making it about half way across the bridge before they were driven back. The Hessian advance was then followed by a force of British infantry who tried to seize the bridge. Of this third attempt, an American Sergeant later wrote “We fired all together again, and such destruction it made you cannot conceive. The bridge looked red as blood, with their killed and wounded and red coats.” That was the end of the fighting.

Though no definitive report of casualties has survived for this battle, it is likely that nearly 365 British and Hessian soldiers were killed, wounded, or captured. In light of the casualties, as darkness fell, General Cornwallis remarked that they could “bag the fox” the next morning and called off the attacks for the night.

The Americans had won another decisive victory at Trenton. And again, General Washington faced difficult decisions. Washington responded in the way he always had – he summoned his senior officers to a council of war to be held at the Douglass House, the quarters of General Arthur St. Clair.

To reach the present site of the Douglas House, walk one block north on Broad Street to Front Street. Turn right on Front Street and walk one block east to the intersection with Montgomery Street.

### **C. Douglass House**

Though removed from its original location on South Broad Street and physically altered since 1777, the Douglass House remains one of Trenton’s most tangible surviving links to the events of the American Revolution. On the evening of January 2, 1777 General Washington held a council of war in this house. The meeting was attended by Washington and leading members of his staff. Washington led this meeting as he had done in so many previous councils. He laid out the problems before the army and solicited advice – he encouraged open and active discussion among those present. Should the Americans attack again? Should they retreat?

Several officers suggested neither another direct attack nor a retreat, but an attack on the enemy’s rear. The bold idea of an attack on Princeton and New Brunswick gained

momentum in the council. Washington made the decision to secretly remove the main American force from Trenton and retreat through the back woods to Princeton. A skeleton force was left behind to feed camp fires and further the illusion that the army was still entrenched. Most of Washington's army left its positions on the Assunpink between midnight and two o'clock in the morning and arrived in Princeton just after dawn on January 3. Washington's timely withdrawal set the stage for a successful engagement with the enemy at Princeton the following day.

## **Conclusion**

The battles of Trenton drastically altered the course of the Revolutionary War. Prior to the two battles of Trenton, the American Army faced near certain defeat. But with two astounding victories right here, in the streets of Trenton, Washington proved that the American army could stand up to the world's greatest military force. For the British, Trenton was a lost opportunity. Had Cornwallis successfully pushed across the Assunpink Bridge, the Revolutionary war would have ended right there. Instead Lord Cornwallis would go on to fight to the bitter end. The war raged on for another six years, until he laid down the colors of the British Army in final surrender at Yorktown, Virginia. Trenton was not at the beginning or the end of the Revolutionary War, but it was certainly at its crossroads.

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*Please visit the Old Barracks Museum for more information on colonial Trenton and the Revolutionary War. Built in 1758 to house British soldiers, the Old Barracks is the last remaining structure of its kind. This renowned State and National Historic Landmark is located on Barrack Street in Trenton.*