

Washington Crosses the Delaware

What is your favorite sport to play? Do you like playing basketball, football, or baseball? Or, are you a dancer who loves to perform in dance competitions?

Imagine the biggest game you've played or the most important performance that you've had. What did that feel like? Were you nervous?

Let's say in that big, important game, there was one minute left on the clock, one inning left, or one minute until the curtain rose. And let's pretend that your team was losing. If you're a football or basketball player, your team needs one more touchdown or one more three-pointer to win the game. If you're a baseball player, it's the bottom of the ninth inning, you are up to bat, bases loaded with two outs, and you need a home run. If you are a dancer, one of your teammates twisted her ankle in warm-ups, so you have to fill in for her part.

In all these examples, you have a team counting on you. No matter what sport you play, when it's game time, the clock is ticking, and when your team is losing, every athlete must set aside their fears and doubts so that they can do their best.

In the winter of 1776, George Washington and the Continental Army found themselves in a similar situation—they were losing the battle for freedom and time was running out.

Recall from our earlier lessons that by 1776, the American Revolutionary War was fully underway. The first half of the year began with a lot of hope and enthusiasm for the colonists' cause for independence. The Continental Army forced the evacuation of British troops from Boston, Thomas Paine's pamphlet, *Common Sense*, inspired support among the colonists for establishing a free nation, and the Declaration of Independence had been finalized.¹ After such victories, the colonists thought, "We can do this. We can stand up to the British, and even though the odds are against us, we might actually win!"

It is important to remember that victory for the American colonists during the Revolutionary War was by no means guaranteed. In fact, many believed that the colonists would lose against the mighty British Empire with their well-trained and well-armed military. But the Continental Army believed in the ideas and values that they were fighting for. The colonists were fueled by a deep sense of patriotism and courage, as well as their firm commitment to defend the fundamental freedoms that had been endowed to them by God.



The fact that the colonial resistance to British rule survived more than a year after the first shots were fired during the Battles of Lexington and Concord was truly remarkable in and of itself.

But as the year went on, the Continental Army, led by George Washington, who was physically huge for his time, the equivalent of an NFL offensive tackle today, suffered a series of devastating defeats.

After pushing the British out of Boston, Washington moved his troops down to New York, where they fought with the British on Long Island.² Here, the British had the advantage because their troops were trained professionals who had room to maneuver, which the colonists weren't trained to do.

Because the Continental troops were getting crushed on Long Island, they had to escape across the East River. Hidden by darkness and a dense fog that rolled in at just the right time to hide the soldiers as the sun rose (which Washington attributed to an act of divine providence), 9,000 Continental soldiers fled the island all through the night of August 29, 1776. George Washington was the last to leave.³

By mid-November, the campaign for control of New York had been won by the British. As a result, the Continental Army had been pushed out and landed in Philadelphia. It was after these months of defeat that Washington's military career during the Revolutionary War was at its lowest point.⁴

By this point, Washington's troops were dwindling. Their spirits were low from defeat, some had given up and deserted their duties, and other soldiers' contracts were about to be up.

The colonists who once dreamed of an independent America were starting to lose hope in the face of daunting odds.

The winter of 1776 was a defining moment for the American colonists. It was the fourth quarter, the last inning, that would determine whether the Continental Army suffered defeat or whether the American Revolutionary War would go into overtime.

Weeks before Christmas, Thomas Paine, who wrote the pamphlet that inspired the American Revolution, once again, picked up his pen—or, rather, his quill.

On December 19, 1776, *The American Crisis* was published. It read: "These are the times that try men's souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman."⁵

What did Paine mean by these words? He was saying that he knew how hard it was for the Continental Army during the cold winter of 1776.

They were cold, tired, injured, sick, hungry, scared, and discouraged. Paine knew that it was not easy for the Continental Army to stand up and fight for what they believed in. However, as he wrote, it is those who stand up for what is right even when it is hard—not just when it is easy—who are heroes.

George Washington, like any good coach, understood how Paine's words could be used to help rally the defeated American troops and explain why their cause was worth fighting for.

Washington ordered officers to read *The American Crisis* to the troops of the Continental Army.⁶ It was these words that helped fuel the colonists' resolve to continue fighting. But Washington knew the Continental Army also needed a bold victory. Not just for morale, but to reignite confidence that the pursuit of freedom and independence could be successful.

Washington devised a plan to launch a surprise attack against Hessian mercenaries (professional German soldiers hired by the British) who were defending Trenton, New Jersey. To do so, the Continental Army would have to cross from Pennsylvania over the Delaware River while braving blistering cold temperatures and terrible weather.

To any observer, this idea seems crazy. But led by Washington's calm courage, the treacherous journey began on Christmas night.

The weather during the crossing of the Delaware River was horrific. The men had to survive what one soldier described as "a perfect hurricane" and trudge through a storm that pummeled them with snow, sleet, and rain.⁷

As one officer wrote, "The wind is northeast and beats in the faces of the men. It will be a terrible night for the soldiers who have no shoes. Some of them have tied old rags around their feet; others are barefoot, but I have not heard a man complain. They are ready to suffer any hardship and die rather than give up their liberty."⁸

At around 11:00 pm on Christmas night, Washington's soldiers began to cross the half-frozen river at three different sites. The troops were divided into three regiments to make the passage. Only the regiment of 2,400 soldiers led by Washington successfully reached the New Jersey side of the Delaware River. Although they were hours behind schedule, the troops arrived just before dawn.⁹

Then, on December 26th, just after 8:00 am in the morning, Washington's forces arrived at the outskirts of the city of Trenton and attacked. The surprised Hessian defenders were not used to fighting in such extreme weather conditions and didn't expect anyone else to be waging battles in the midst of such brutal winter weather. They had also misjudged the strength and resilience of the Continental Army after months of British victories throughout the New York area.

Washington's men made quick work of the Germans' defenses, and after just an hour of fighting, the Hessians surrendered.¹⁰ With the defeat of the Hessians at the Battle of Trenton, Washington managed to secure a major victory for America.

The brave leadership of Washington and the courage of his men during the crossing of the Delaware were a vital turning point in the Revolutionary War. Without the success of this mission, the American revolutionary cause may have indeed failed. Washington's triumph at the Battle of Trenton reignited the belief that victory was possible over the most powerful empire in the world, which, in the following weeks, encouraged thousands of volunteers to join the cause. The patriotic determination to continue the fight for freedom had been restored.

Footnotes

1. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/british-evacuate-boston>
2. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/new-york/>
3. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/battle-of-long-island/>
4. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/new-york-campaign/>
5. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.03902300/?st=text>
6. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/thomas-paine/>
7. <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-revolutionary-war/washingtons-revolutionary-war-battles/the-trenton-princeton-campaign/10-facts-about-washingtons-crossing-of-the-delaware-river/>
8. Getting source
9. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/washington-crosses-the-delaware>
10. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/battle-of-trenton/>

Additional Resources

- <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/british-evacuate-boston>
- <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/new-york/>
- <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/battle-of-long-island/>
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- <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.03902300/?st=text>
- <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/thomas-paine/>
- <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-revolutionary-war/washingtons-revolutionary-war-battles/the-trenton-princeton-campaign/10-facts-about-washingtons-crossing-of-the-delaware-river/>
- <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/washington-crosses-the-delaware>
- <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/battle-of-trenton/>

