

BATTLE DIGEST™

Lessons for Today's Leaders

Volume 4 ★ Issue 5

Early American Wars:

Trenton

DATE:

Dec. 26, 1776

LOCATION:

Trenton, New Jersey



OPPOSING FORCES

American Forces: 2,400 men with 18 cannons, commanded by Gen. George Washington. His two division commanders were Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene and Maj. Gen. John Sullivan. Brig. Gen. Henry Knox commanded the artillery.

Hessian Forces: 1,400 men with six cannons, commanded by Col. Johann Gottlieb Rall. His three regimental commanders were Lt. Col. Balthasar Brethauer (Grenadier Regiment von Rall), Lt. Col. Francis Scheffer (Fusilier Regiment von Lossberg), and Maj. Friedrich von Dechow (Fusilier Regiment von Knyphausen). Gen. William Howe served as the overall British commander-in-chief in the colonies. Lt. Gen. Charles Cornwallis served as his primary field commander and led the pursuit of Washington through New Jersey.



HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

In the fall of 1776, after losing New York, Gen. George Washington's demoralized army moved south to regroup and prepare to defend New Jersey and Philadelphia. Lt. Gen. Charles Cornwallis, meanwhile, pursued the rebel force, hoping to defeat them before winter. Fortunately for Washington, during his retreat, he managed to delay Cornwallis long enough for Washington's army to escape across the Delaware River. Then, he did something extraordinary. As Cornwallis's army went into winter quarters, Washington launched a surprise attack on the Hessian garrison at Trenton. This bold stroke caught the British and Hessians off guard, resulting in the first significant American victory of the war. The timing was as desperate as it was brilliant. Just when American morale was at its lowest ebb, Washington motivated the new American nation to carry on.



STRATEGY & MANEUVER

Actions by the British - In March 1776, Gen. William Howe (commander-in-chief of British forces in the Colonies) was forced to abandon Boston and encamp at Halifax, Nova Scotia. This temporary setback ended with the decision to take New York, a deep-water port for British ships and a base to control the Hudson River. In July, Howe's army of 25,000 landed on Staten Island, and by the end of November, they had outmaneuvered and defeated Washington at every turn. (*Map 1*)

With control of New York, the Howe brothers (Admiral Richard Howe commanded the British Navy in the colonies) forced the

down the Hudson had failed, they adjusted. With winter approaching, Cornwallis would continue to pursue Washington south into New Jersey while securing the eastern counties and their abundant food supplies for winter.¹

As Cornwallis pursued Washington, he nearly caught him at Newark, then again at New Brunswick. (*Map 1*) But Washington eluded him with a rear guard that felled trees and attacked in numbers just large enough to require Cornwallis to fully deploy his forces. In a letter home, one British officer wrote, "As we go forward into the country the rebels fly before us, and we come back they always follow us. 'Tis almost impossible to catch them. They will neither fight nor totally run away, but they keep at such a distance that we are always a day's march from them. We seem to be playing at bo peep."² By the time Cornwallis approached Washington's army at Trenton, his advance guard saw the last Americans crossing over the river. Cornwallis had missed Washington again. And because Cornwallis could not procure any boats, his soldiers were forced to pause.

On 13 Dec., William Howe changed his plans. Deciding that Washington's feeble army could wait, he ordered his army into winter quarters. After which, Cornwallis convinced him to push out his defensive perimeter to cover Trenton, Pennington, and Bordentown, with a forward base at Brunswick.³ Normally, such a dispersed front would be ill-advised, but both men agreed that the rebel army was in no shape to pose a serious threat. They were comfortable enough that Cornwallis prepared to sail to England for the winter.



Col. Johann Gottlieb Rall

Meanwhile, Col. Johann Gottlieb Rall, the Hessian commander at Trenton, shared Howe's and Cornwallis's disdain for Washington's army. Despite taking basic precautions such as sentries and patrols, Rall failed to fortify his position in any meaningful way. He even ignored suggestions from his staff to emplace redoubts on the approach into town. Despite constant attacks on his patrols and repeated warnings by local Loyalists of a planned American attack, Rall was unmoved. "Let them come!" he replied. "We want no trenches; we'll have at them with bayonets!"⁴ His biases were further confirmed after meeting with a local man - presumed to be a Loyalist - who had been briefly captured by the rebels. After hearing about Washington's sorry state of an army across the river, he exclaimed, "We will have a merry Christmas after all!" and although the stories of Hessian