

Washington Crossing the Delaware: Triumph and Tragedy on the Road to America

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Under the blanket of the night sky on December 25, 1776, the Delaware River was swept into a war with the weather. *Crash!* The choppy waves reached for the sky, as they tried to escape the grip of the freezing ice. However, something was different about this night on the Delaware. Multiple men stood in a series of large boats, some using oars to defeat the ice. Some men even became prey for the mighty water predator! When Washington courageously crossed the Delaware River with his troops, he battled the harsh weather that came with it, tipping the balance scale in favor of tragedy. However, the tragedy was needed to turn the tide of the American Revolution, putting forth courage into the cause of creating a new nation, founded on the ideals of justice and happiness.

Before the American Revolutionary War began, conflict built between America and Britain. This conflict was in the form of the French and Indian War (Keller 114). This war was fought between the Americans and the British against the French for territorial gain in North America (Keller 100). The Americans, winning the war with the British in 1763, felt proud, while the British were overwhelmed with war debt (Keller 144-115). In order to pay for the debt, the British started taxing the Americans without their consent (Keller 116). In 1774, the First Continental Congress met in Philadelphia to discuss Britain's oppression of America (Keller 124). In 1775, the Second Continental Congress met, appointing George Washington as the leader of the Continental Army (Keller 131). The Second Continental Congress also declared the desire to be independent from Britain (Keller 133). In the Declaration of Independence, the Americans declared the following: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" (*Journals of the Continental Congress*). At the start of the American Revolutionary War, both sides had certain advantages and

disadvantages. The British had an established army, but their supplies were all the way in England (Keller 147-148). In addition, their Hessian mercenaries were not loyal to the cause (Keller 147). The passionate Americans had the home advantage, but they definitely did not have an established army (Keller 148-149). In the Battle of Long Island, the British captured Manhattan and took American soldiers (Keller 150). At this time, Thomas Paine emerged as an influential writer, persuading Americans to continue on with the fight. In part, he wrote, "I call...upon all...better have too much force than too little...when so great an object is at stake" (Paine, Thomas). The French and Indian War was a triumph for the Americans, uniting them in spirit. However, for the British, their balance scale tipped more in favor of tragedy. The British basically used the Americans to benefit themselves. In the Declaration of Independence, Americans declared that they had the right to oppress their overbearing ruler and live a happy life. The British had had a history of military triumph, but the Hessian mercenaries remained neutral in their support. The Americans could imagine triumph in the war, but realistically, their balance scale was tipping more towards tragedy. Thomas Paine inspired Americans to use their passion to drive the war forward. The British ruled the Americans oppressively, and the Americans were determined to fight back.

Once the American Revolutionary War began, the British came up with a strategic plan. In 1776, General William Howe (who had defeated Washington in New York) believed that fighting was over in New Jersey and received instruction from England to establish British control in the state through an offering of loyalty and peace (Fischer 160-161). Eventually, British troops started raiding the homes of people, stealing supplies they needed (Fischer 173). On December 14, General Howe held a meeting, in which three posts were established along the Delaware River (Fischer 182). Colonel von Donop would lead the main post at Bordentown

(Fischer 185). Colonel Stirling would be posted six miles south of Bordentown, and the Hessians in Trenton would be led by Colonel Johann Rall (Fischer 185). James Ewing, stationed directly across the river from Trenton, sent his American troops to attack the Hessians multiple times (Fischer 195). At the main British post in Bordentown, Colonel Donop's forces caused the local militia to retreat their attack, so Donop stayed in the deserted area from December 23-25 (Fischer 199-200). He plundered the houses in the area and was completely unreachable from Trenton (Fischer 199-200). The British prepared for a large American attack, but thankfully, were hit with a nor'easter, so Washington's troops could not cross the river (Fischer 205). Little did they know that Washington had other plans. General Howe became a little too optimistic, automatically tipping Britain's balance scale in favor of triumph. However, while the British rejoiced over newfound supplies, the people of New Jersey felt the effects of tragedy, as their livelihoods were taken away from them. To maintain triumph, General Howe secured the border on the Delaware River, as to prevent further conflict. Unfortunately, in Trenton, the Americans cheated the British system and attacked the Hessians. While Colonel Donop experienced triumph over his defeat of the local militia, his decision to remove himself from British communication would prove to be tragic. The British thought luck was on their side, but the Americans had their own plans. The British had a certain way of doing things, but the Americans wanted to prove that they could truly win the war.

The day of the crossing felt different than other days. On Christmas morning, the American troops were buzzing (Fischer 206). The women were cooking, while officers made their rounds, checking to make sure each soldier had his weapons (Fischer 206). Some lucky soldiers even received blankets to stay warm in the snow (Fischer 206)! Others were not so lucky, though, becoming sick with malaria (Fischer 208). At about 4 o'clock, an evening parade

took place, just as had always been practiced (Fischer 207). However, this parade was different (Fischer 207). Everyone carried their weapons and were prepared for battle (Fischer 207). The troops had no idea where they were going, but they were too gloomy to care (Fischer 208). All they cared about was the victory they hoped would come (Fischer 208). In the tragedy of cold weather, the troops gained some weight on the triumph side of the balance scale. They warmed themselves up, feeling just a little bit of happiness. Other soldiers, however, were defeated by tragedy, becoming weak and hopeless. Many soldiers did not favor either side; they had been consistently put down by previous British battle successes, but there was still a future ahead. On Christmas morning, the American troops experienced triumph and tragedy immediately, but they had to keep going.

On Christmas afternoon, Washington created a plan for the crossing. The troops were set up in columns of 8 (Fischer 208). Washington ordered the troops to remain as quiet as possible (Fischer 208). The officers wore a white paper in their hats, to signify leadership to the lesser soldiers (Fischer 208). The plan was to cross the Delaware in the evening and attack Trenton before the sun rose (Fischer 208). The army would cross at the same time in four separate parts (Fischer 208). Washington and his highest officers would cross at the McConkey's and Johnson's ferries north of Trenton (Fischer 208). James Ewing and his troops would cross at Trenton Ferry, so as to block the Assunpink Creek bridge in the southeast (Fischer 209). This way, the Hessians could not escape (Fischer 209). Colonel John Cadwalader's Philadelphia militia and Colonel Daniel Hitchcock's New England troops would cross at Bristol to land in Burlington, south of Trenton (Fischer 209). Their mission was to distract Colonel Donop (Fischer 209). The plan predicted what the balance scale would look like in the end. By staying quiet and crossing in the evening, the troops would ensure that tragedy would surprise the Hessians in Trenton. Officers

signified their role in the triumph of the American troops, and the focus on cooperation was very apparent. The last parts of the plan proclaimed that the Hessians would be surrounded in isolation, tipping their balance scale entirely in favor of tragedy. Washington's plan predicted triumph, but would reality reflect this?

Washington's plan unfortunately began to fall apart. He had wanted the troops to, before crossing at their specific locations, get ready away from the river, so as not to be seen from the New Jersey side (Fischer 209). It was imperative that the troops reach their crossing locations before sunset, so they could cross in the dark, when they would not be seen (Fischer 209). John Greenwood's regiment was behind schedule and had to carry heavy items without shoes (Fischer 209-210). At this time, Washington received a letter from General Horatio Gates, who said that his troops would take over Philadelphia (Fischer 210). Gates was so committed to his plan that he declared he would propose the idea to Congress (Fischer 210). Washington just ignored Gates' ambitious plans and focused on the crossing (Fischer 212). As the troops gathered at the river, the nor'easter hit (Fischer 212). James Ewing's forces met a major obstacle before they crossed: an ice jam (Fischer 212). Cadwalader and Hitchcock met a deep river with rapidly moving water at Neshaminy Ferry (Fischer 214). Instead, they tried to cross at Dunk's Ferry, but the ice was so thick that they could not land on the other side (Fischer 214). As such, the troops could not participate in the crossing (Fischer 215). Washington's plan soon fell to reality. Soldiers were behind schedule, just too weak to move at a faster pace. General Gates was too ambitious and extremely conceited and could have easily distracted Washington to the point where the Americans would have experienced tragedy. However, Washington ignored Gates and focused on tipping that scale towards triumph. Unfortunately, bad news presided, as the nor'easter really made its mark. The river swelled with chaos, using ice to block the troops, and as such, multiple

soldiers sunk into tragedy, hopeless for the cause of an American victory. Washington had set very high expectations, but the soldiers could not meet them with the weather blocking their way.

It was up to Washington and his troops to cross the river at McConkey's Ferry. Luckily, Washington had many tools at his disposal. The New Jersey militia had provided Durham boats (Fischer 216). Some of these boats reached up to 60 feet long, and they had flat bottoms and high sides (Fischer 216). 4-5 people steered them with oars, and some boats even contained sails (Fischer 216). Most men in the boats did not sit because if they did, they would sit in freezing ice (Fischer 216). Ferryboats were also used, though (Fischer 216). These boats carried horses and weapons (Fischer 216). To help with the crossing, the troops had three groups of watermen with them (Fischer 217). Colonel John Glover brought New England men who wore distinctive blue jackets and wool caps (Fischer 217). Other watermen were from Philadelphia, and still others were ferrymen (Fischer 217). Washington gave command of the crossing to Henry Knox, who was big and tall and had a deep voice (Fischer 218). Knox's toughest task was to deal with the scared horses and weapons aboard the ferryboats (Fischer 218). The majority of the troops could not swim, and some even fell into the river (Fischer 219)! Thankfully, no one died (Fischer 219). As Washington wrote to Continental Congress, "the Quantity of Ice, made that Night, impeded the passage of the Boats so much, that it was three O'Clock before the Artillery could all get over, and near four, before the Troops took up their line of march" (*Washington Papers*). After the crossing was complete, Washington came up with a secret password: Victory or Death (Fischer 220). Washington felt the weight of the scale on his shoulders, as it was up to him to lead the American troops to victory on the river. The New Jersey militia ensured that the troops would be able to defeat the freezing waters in ginormous boats. Ferryboats carried the key to the

American victory: weapons. Watermen provided knowledge, eager to help the troops in their noble cause. Henry Knox was built to be a commander, and with him in tow, the triumphant troops made it across the river to New Jersey! Washington wrote that the troops were way behind schedule, but at this point, he recognized that no matter the time, the Americans still had a chance to fully tip the scale towards triumph. Washington and his troops successfully crossed the Delaware River, thanks to both materials and people.

After Washington and his troops crossed the Delaware River, they marched their way to Trenton (and future victory) (Keller 153). The Hessians were surprised by the American attack, since they did not expect the Americans to attack dead in the middle of a winter storm (Keller 153). During the Battle of Trenton, local militia joined the Americans, and together, they defeated the Hessians in 1 hour (Keller 153). This was mainly because of the Americans' untraditional fighting style. They used 8-9 canons per 1,000 enemy troops, and they also engaged in enfilade fighting (firing down a column of enemy troops) (Fischer 223-224). After the battle, the Americans would go on to a series of victories and defeats. They defeated the British in Princeton, but later lost to the British near Philadelphia (Keller 154-155). The Americans spent the winter of 1777 at Valley Forge, compared to the British, who had gained access to all the luxuries of the home of the Continental Congress (Keller 156). Finally, in the Battle of Yorktown, Washington and his French allies managed to defeat Lord Cornwallis' force (Keller 163). The Treaty of Paris officially recognized America's independence (Keller 163). Washington's plan worked! The Hessians' scale quickly tipped in favor of tragedy, as they were completely surrounded by nature's forces and Washington's forces. In a short period of time, contrasting to the amount of time it took the Americans to cross the river, the Americans were



efficient and basically guaranteed triumph. Afterwards, Washington and his troops had to again endure the tragedy of cold weather, but they knew what to do, and eventually, they would go on to win the Revolutionary War. The Treaty of Paris made the ideals of the Declaration of Independence official: America really did triumph and become an independent nation.

In conclusion, Washington and his troops experienced both triumph and tragedy. Mother Nature tried to place weight on tragedy, determined not to let the Americans destroy British history and tradition. However, the Americans had something the British did not have: passion.

Washington brought Americans from all different walks of life together under the ideals of freedom and happiness. He also created a detailed plan and executed it, bringing together the finest tools and people. For the Americans, triumph could not come without tragedy.

Experiencing the nor'easter gave Americans the chance to feel failure, and with this in mind, they learned how to defeat the most powerful of enemies. The balance scale of tragedy and triumph is present everywhere in life. When tragedy weighs heavy, it allows triumph to be felt even more.

## Annotated Bibliography

### Primary Sources

***Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, ed. Worthington C. Ford et al. (Washington, D.C., 1904-37), 5:510.**

This source is an online book. This source was used in my historical context to provide an excerpt of the document that declared America's desire to be independent from Britain. This online book helped me understand the ideals of 1776 America and how those ideals carried into the American Revolutionary War.

**Paine, Thomas. *The American crisis No. 1 By the author of Common sense. Boston Sold opposite the court house Queen Street. Boston, 1776. Pdf.* <https://www.loc.gov/item/rbpe.03902300/>.**

This source is also an online book. This source was also used in my historical context to provide an excerpt of the work that inspired the American Revolutionary soldiers to keep going and not give up the fight. This online book helped me understand the ideals the Americans relied on to defeat the British.

***Washington Papers, Series 3, Varick Transcripts, 1775 to 1785, Subseries 3A, Continental Congress, 1775 to 1783, Letterbook 2: Sept. 24, 1776. 1776. Manuscript/Mixed Material.* <https://www.loc.gov/item/mgw3a.002/>.**

This source is a collection of online letters. This source was used in the main body of my essay to describe the events of Washington's crossing of the Delaware River. This source helped me understand what Washington himself felt of the events that had occurred and allowed me to view history in a more realistic light.

## Secondary Sources

**Fischer, David. *Washington's Crossing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.**

This source is a book. This source was used in the main body of my essay to provide the evidence to support my analysis of history. This source was used in the Washington Crossing Historic Park Book Club, and it provided my essay with historical facts.

**Keller, Morton, Mary Beth Klee, Joshua Zeitz, and John Holdren. *The American Odyssey: A History of the United States*. Roanoke: K12, 2009.**

This source is the textbook used in my Honors U.S. History course. This source was used to provide the historical facts in my historical context, short-term changes, and long-term changes sections. This source helped me understand what led up to Washington's crossing of the Delaware and what the importance of the event was.