

*New Jersey's
Revolutionary Experience*

22

*The Christmas
Campaign: The Ten
Days of Trenton
and Princeton*

KEMBLE WIDMER

New Jersey Historical Commission

NEW JERSEY'S REVOLUTIONARY EXPERIENCE

Larry R. Gerlach, *Editor*

This series of publications is dedicated to the memory of Alfred E. Driscoll, governor of New Jersey from 1947 to 1954, in grateful tribute to his lifelong support of the study and teaching of the history of New Jersey and the United States. He was a member of the New Jersey Historical Commission from 1970 until his death on March 9, 1975.

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**THE NEW JERSEY AMERICAN
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Foreword

New Jersey's Revolutionary Experience is a Bicentennial pamphlet series published by the New Jersey Historical Commission with a grant from the New Jersey Bicentennial Commission. The twenty-six numbers and two teachers' guides are intended to acquaint secondary school students and the general public with the state's history during the era of the American Revolution. Some titles treat aspects of the Revolution in New Jersey, while others show how important themes of the colonial period developed during the revolutionary years; some bring together the results of existing scholarship, while others present the findings of original research; some are written by professional historians, and others by laymen whose investigations of Jersey history exceed avocation. Because the series is directed to a general audience, the pamphlets have no footnotes but contain bibliographical essays which offer suggestions for further reading.

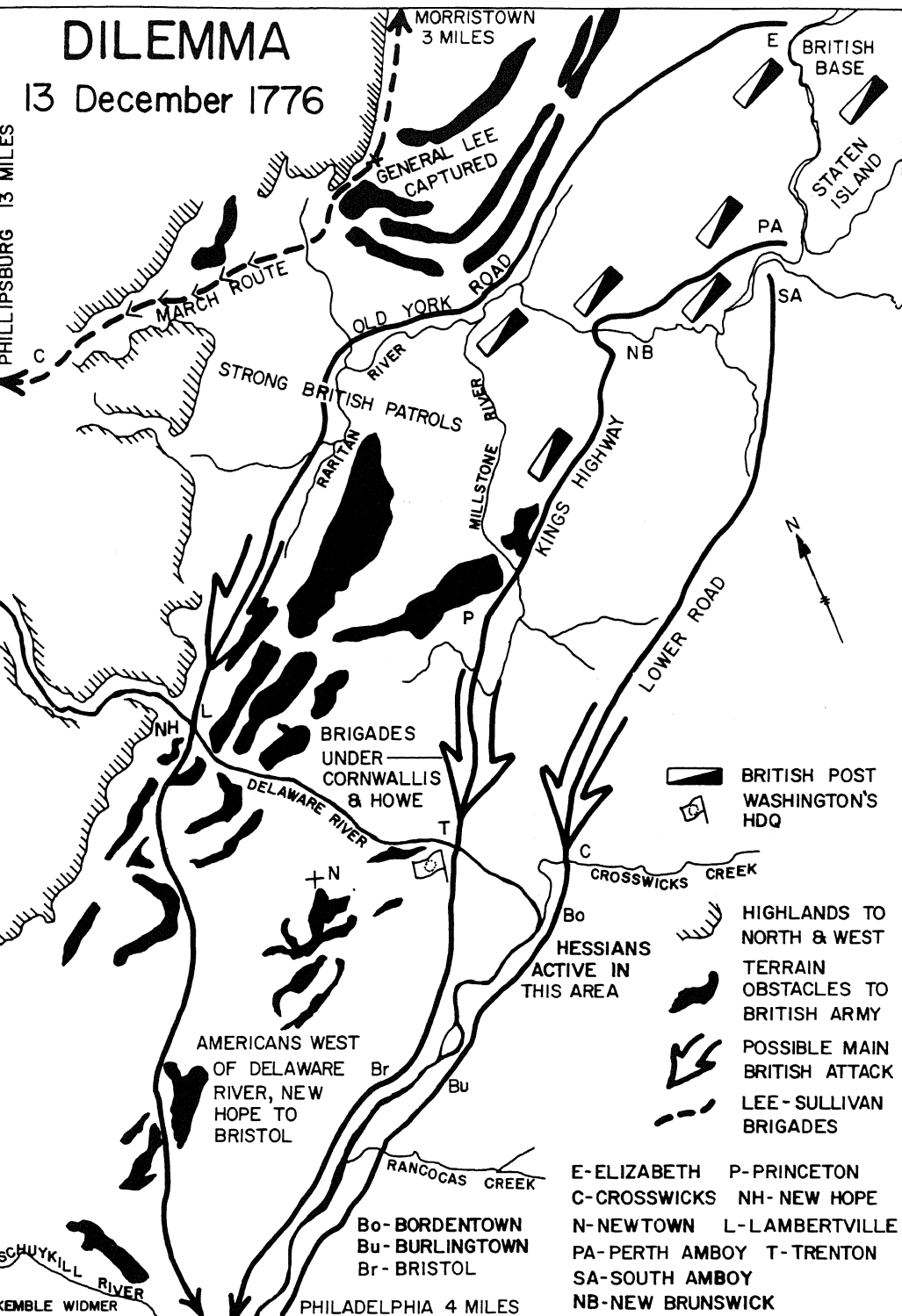
New Jersey's Revolutionary Experience is the product of a cooperative venture by numerous individuals and agencies. On my behalf and that of the pamphlets' readers, I accord recognition and appreciation to the individual authors for their contributions to New Jersey history, to the New Jersey American Revolution Bicentennial Celebration Commission and the New Jersey Historical Commission for their support of the project, to Hank Simon, president, Trentypo, Inc., for his invaluable suggestions and cooperation in producing the series, and to the staff of the Historical Commission: Richard Waldron, Public Programs Coordinator, who as project director supervised the series from commencement to completion; Peggy Lewis, Chief of Publications and Information, and Lee R. Parks, Assistant Editor, who edited and designed each number; and William C. Wright, Associate Director, who contributed valuable suggestions at every stage of production.

Larry R. Gerlach
University of Utah

DILEMMA

13 December 1776

PHILLIPSBURG 13 MILES



Ask the average citizen about New Jersey during the American Revolution in 1776, and he will probably know that Washington crossed the Delaware River and defeated the Hessians at Trenton, but the chances are that he will erroneously say Washington crossed the river on Christmas eve. Most accounts treat the battle of Trenton and the battle of Princeton as separate entities and ignore the second battle of Trenton (the battle of the Assunpink). Almost completely unknown is the importance of the Pennsylvania State Navy and the New Jersey militia units, which made Washington's victories possible.

Everyone will agree it was a critical time; Tom Paine said so. But if asked to name the most critical period or the turning point of the Revolution, most people will probably say the encampment of the Continental army at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania during the winter of 1777-1778. However, at no other time during the eight years of fighting did Washington have so many difficulties and so few means of extricating himself as he had in December of 1776.

The army's stamina and devotion at this time have seldom been equaled, and their trials probably far exceeded what most of us could endure today. The suffering of the ill-clothed, ill-fed, ill-equipped and exhausted veterans of Washington's army has been ably described by others, and my omission of these details should not be construed as diminishing their importance. In short, the weather was bad, the troops were in deplorable condition, morale was low, and many thought that Washington's army and the cause of independence would not endure long into the new year of 1777.

This pamphlet is an account of the factors which influenced the strategy and tactics of the campaign of Trenton and Princeton.

Strategy depends largely on terrain, troops available and conditions governing their supply and movement. Tactics concern weapons, organization and time and direction of troop movements.

On July 2, 1776, the British in great strength landed unopposed on Staten Island, a natural citadel moated by Raritan Bay, Kill van Kull and Lower New York Bay. Occupation of this large island permitted General Sir William Howe, commander in chief of His Majesty's troops in North America, to give a degree of protection to Tory sympathizers in Monmouth County; provided ready access and protection to the area between Perth Amboy and New Brunswick; served as a base for the campaign which levered Washington out of Long Island, Manhattan and Westchester County; and ended with the capture of Fort Washington on November 16. Between August 27 and November 20, 1776, the British had opened the Hudson, raised doubts about Washington's generalship, and made impossible the continued occupation of New York City and environs by the Continental army.

At the beginning of the retreat across New Jersey, Washington had two options—retreat to the security of Morristown behind the Watchung Mountains and leave the road to Philadelphia open to Howe, or keep his army between the British and the new nation's capital. He rightly chose the latter course. (See map, p. 4.)

On December 8 the last of Washington's main army crossed the Delaware River, the first effective barrier to the British advance, as a Hessian column marched into Trenton. Washington had had the foresight to order Colonel Richard Humpton, as early as December 1, to collect all boats on the Delaware from Trenton northward, and he ordered Commander Thomas Seymour to use his Pennsylvania State Navy to secure all boats in a similar manner on the tidal portions of the Delaware from Trenton south.

In temporary safety across the Delaware with all boats under guard and artillery emplaced at all ferries and fords, Washington had to prepare for three possible moves by Howe and Lieutenant General Charles Cornwallis, his second in command: an attempt to cross the Delaware as soon as it was frozen at or above Trenton, an advance down the New Jersey side of the river, or an attempt to go around his northern flank at or near Coryell's Ferry—modern Lambertville, New Jersey. (The names of ferries mentioned throughout this essay refer to the owner on the side of the river at which the boat starts to cross. Thus, Washington crossed to Trenton at

McKonkey's Ferry but returned by Johnson's, which is the New Jersey side of the same crossing. Yardley's Ferry in Pennsylvania is Howell's Ferry in New Jersey.)

Travelers from Newark to Philadelphia had a choice between two routes nearly equal in length—the Kings Highway through New Brunswick, Princeton and Trenton, and the Old York Road through Somerville, Middlebrook (modern Bound Brook), Ringoes and New Hope, Pennsylvania. The Old York Road had a number of hills, particularly west of the Delaware, that would not be found on the Trenton-Princeton route, but it was nevertheless a route Washington had to watch; the British were very active along it in and west of Somerville in mid-December of 1776. On December 15, Washington took the precaution of sending Captain Daniel Bray and others of the Hunterdon County militia to collect all boats on the upper Delaware and Lehigh rivers and bring them down to Coryell's Ferry or below.

The sudden departure of Cornwallis from Lawrenceville on December 9 toward Coryell's Ferry suggested that this would be the direction of attack, though it could, of course, be a feint. The best way to buy time in this more rugged and wooded country was to send riflemen into the area to form a brigade under Brigadier General Matthias Alexis Roche de Fermoy.

Washington had placed his most experienced battalions along the river north of Yardley, Pennsylvania. Opposite Trenton and north to Yardley there is an abrupt rise of sixty feet or more at or within a mile of the river bank. Although the rise is not impassable, anyone on top of it would have a decided advantage over anyone trying to climb it. Here Washington had positioned Brigadier General James Ewing's Pennsylvania militia and the New Jersey militia under General Philemon Dickinson—who could watch from there as the Hessians occupied his recently purchased estate, the *Hermitage*, near Trenton.

South of Trenton the flagship *Montgomery*, with sixteen nine-pounders, and thirteen galleys of the Pennsylvania State Navy, each armed with at least an eighteen-pound cannon, patrolled the tidal portion of the river. Not only did their presence prevent Tories from crossing to assist the British, it enabled the rebels to land and recover groups of the militia unit known as the Philadelphia Associators raiding or seeking information in New Jersey.

Even at the time, the terms *galley*, *gunboat*, *gondola*, *gundola*, *armed boat*, *armed vessel*, and even *schooner* were confused to the extent that they are essentially synonymous. A galley was a little over fifty feet long, about four and one-half feet deep, and about thirteen feet wide. It was painted black and yellow. It was decked over, fitted with one or two short masts with triangular or lanteen sails, and provided with space along the sides for a single or double bank of from ten to twenty oars. In the bow it carried the largest possible cannon, balanced by scrap iron in the stern cubicle (a cabin reserved for the ship's officers). The boats also had swivel guns and small howitzers (mortars) when these were available.

Most significant and most often overlooked were the overwhelming range and weight of the ball of the galleys compared to the missiles of the six-pounders of the Hessians. Bordentown, on top of sixty-foot bluffs, was out of reach, but Burlington and other settlements low on the riverbank were at the mercy of these naval cannon. The appearance of Hessians in the streets of Burlington on December 11 led to a bombardment of several hours that convinced Colonel Carl von Donop that he could not use the town as winter quarters for his composite grenadier regiments.

On December 13, 1776, five days after reaching Trenton, Howe, frustrated in his attempt to find boats, ordered his army into a line of winter quarters from Hackensack to Burlington. Though he admitted that this line was a bit extensive, he did not feel it was endangered even with the Hessian mercenaries at the far end (Burlington), because of their excellent record at Fort Washington. The last post, Bordentown-Burlington, with grenadiers, would also receive the Forty-second Highlanders, the tough Black Watch, and another grenadier battalion with heavy artillery (eighteen-pounders). The commander at Bordentown, von Donop, also exercised nominal command over all the Hessian forces in New Jersey, though those at Trenton were under the actual control of Colonel Johann G. Rall.

The biggest event of this December 13, however, was the capture of General Charles Lee, who, while reluctantly moving his brigades to reinforce Washington, had hung on the British flank and rear seeking an opportunity for some stroke which would increase his stature as a military genius. He was captured by the Sixteenth Light Dragoons, which had been his regiment when he

served with the British before the Revolution. Both the British and the Americans considered Lee an extremely able general. His capture, thought a great loss at the time, was actually most beneficial to the American cause.

Upon Lee's capture, Major General John Sullivan took command of two thousand or more New England veterans and marched them rapidly to Easton, Pennsylvania, to avoid the British believed to be near Coryell's Ferry. There he found four regiments which had come from Ticonderoga under General Horatio Gates. All marched down the Delaware, reaching the main army on December 29, 1776, tired, out of sorts, and out of almost everything except their weapons.

By December 20 Washington had about five thousand effectives in eight brigades strung out from New Hope to Pennsbury Manor and about two thousand militia opposite Trenton and southward along the river to Bristol. He must do something before most of his army's enlistments expired at the end of the year—a fact known to the British when they went into winter quarters.

What the Pennsylvania Navy had started, a tiny force of militia, all or mostly all from Gloucester, Cumberland and Salem counties, now finished. Washington had been almost certain that the British would move down the Jersey side of the Delaware. Colonel von Donop's occupation of Bordentown and movement to Burlington had seemed to confirm this analysis. To protect against this eventuality Washington had asked General Israel Putnam, in command of the defense of Philadelphia, to send Colonel Samuel Griffin with some Pennsylvania militia and two Virginia artillery companies to stiffen the South Jersey militia and occupy positions along Rancocas Creek. The New Jersey units under Colonel Silas Newcomb annoyed the Hessians until von Donop became convinced that the Americans would come the opposite way to roll up the line of British posts. His inability to occupy Burlington because of the firepower of the galleys was an inconvenience, but the appearance of Griffin beyond the Rancocas and his vigorous patrolling confirmed von Donop's opinion. He moved the Forty-second Black Watch and the von Block grenadiers to Mount Holly. His other battalions held Bordentown, Columbus, and Mansfield Square, with pickets as far out as Crosswicks Creek.

CROSSING TO TRENTON

4AM 26 Dec 1776

TO HARBOURTON

WAGONS OF STIRLINGS BRIGADE CROSSED HERE

MARCH BEGINS ABOUT 4AM

PROBABLE LINE OF STEPHENS OUTPOSTS

PENNINGTON

HEAD OF WASHINGTONS COLUMN ABOUT 5AM

BIRMINGHAM (WEST TRENTON)

EWING CHURCH

YARDLEYS FERRY

HOWELL'S FERRY

ST CLAIR
GLOVER
SARGENT

SULLIVAN'S DIVISION

GREEN'S DIVISION
STEPHEN

ROCHE de FERMOY
STIRLING
MERCER

BEATTY'S FERRY

TRENTON FALLS

TRENTON

ASSUNPINK CREEK

A BATTLE MONUMENT
B OLD BARRACKS
C TRENT HOUSE
D HERMITAGE

MILES FROM JOHNSONS FERRY

ARTILLERY

GENERAL EWING'S PENN MILITIA COULD NOT CROSS HERE

TRENTON FERRY

0 1 2

KEMBLE WIDMER

Active patrols, paid informants, and sympathetic local citizens were supplying abundant information to both sides. The language difficulty with the Hessians and a tendency to overemphasize the sorry condition of the rebels hampered the British evaluation. John Honeyman and other American agents, however, kept Washington well informed. He now knew that von Donop could not quickly respond to an attack on Trenton and began a rather involved and ambitious plan of action for the end of December. When Sullivan arrived, Washington was strong enough to attack at least one of the British cantonments. He began to think in terms of a feint or disturbance by Griffin and an attack by Colonel John Cadwalader's Pennsylvania militia to keep von Donop occupied in the Burlington area. Washington would attack Rall at Trenton with the main body, and Ewing would cross below Trenton to prevent Rall from retreating to join von Donop. Washington may have decided on this plan as early as December 20, but as late as the twenty-second it was not known to Cadwalader.

The opportunity presented by the dispersion of von Donop's forces was not lost on Cadwalader and Colonel Joseph Reed, Washington's adjutant general, who had been sent to the Bristol area to perform a number of special missions. They advised Washington in a letter of December 22 that Cadwalader's main body would cross on the morning of the twenty-third either to attack the Hessians in the Columbus area or to reenforce Griffin if he were being attacked by the Hessians, which seemed likely. Washington wrote Reed on the twenty-third saying that if he had not attacked last night he should wait until "Christmas Day at night, one hour before day . . . the time fixed upon for our attempt on Trenton. For Heaven's sake keep this to yourself as the discovery of it may prove fatal to us." Fortunately, the most important segment of Washington's plan worked out without depending on the success of the other parts.

For a number of days Washington had ordered his men paraded in the afternoon equipped to march with "three days' provisions, ready cooked" and their blankets. On Christmas day, instead of being dismissed after the daily parade, the units marched to an assembly area about one mile west of McKonkey's Ferry.

Much has been made of Washington's stroke of genius in using Durham boats — flat bottomed freight boats — to transport the

infantry in this most difficult of military maneuvers, a river crossing. But there were also mounted officers and eighteen cannon, each with its limber (two-wheeled rigs which support the trail of the cannon), and wagons or carts to carry powder and shot to be gotten across. I have tried to load a scale-model cannon into a scale-model Durham boat. It cannot be done without fouling the walking boards or having trail and cannon stick out far beyond the sides of the boat. It took about nine hours to get the artillery across. Two ferries, each carrying one cannon at a time, would take this long to move eighteen cannons at one round trip an hour—a reasonable pace, considering the difficulty of loading horses, limbers, powder carts, and cannoneers.

The current in the river was used to push the ferry boats across. The boats were attached to rope cables strung high in the air for a trolley wheel or, by long ropes, to rock-filled cribs on the middle of the river bottom upstream. To move the ferry the boatman had only to pull the forward end upstream; the river did the rest.

Brigadier General Adam Stephen's Virginia Brigade of the Continental army crossed first and secured the landing area by establishing a ring of posts on the surrounding high ground, particularly the Harbourton-Trenton Road and the Pennington-Johnson Ferry Road (known today as West Delaware Avenue out of Pennington).

According to the plans, once the troops had reached New Jersey they would be assembled in divisions. (See map, p. 10.) Major General Nathanael Greene's division would lead the march toward Trenton, followed by Sullivan's division. The divisions would separate at the Bear Tavern, in Birmingham (modern West Trenton), Sullivan taking the River Road into Trenton. Interestingly the Bear Tavern is mentioned in only one diary, and does not show on the road map made by Robert Erskine for Washington in 1778. The Erskine map shows no River Road along the river north of West Trenton, either, and no road for the present Mercer County Route #546. (In most instances the modern road or street name will be used in what follows). From West Trenton the distances into Trenton are nearly equal. Greene's division would have a mile or more of extra marching by other routes. The old road from West Trenton to Scotch Road near the Ewing Presbyterian Church has been obliterated in modern times by the County Airport and the Naval

Air Testing Center. Washington's plan was a pincer or double envelopment of the Hessians at Trenton: Sullivan would attack east along State Street near the river and Greene would attack south down Warren and Broad streets.

The sixteen hundred Hessians in Rall's three regiments—the Fusileer Regiments Alt (or old) von Lossberg and von Knyphausen and the Grenadier Regiment Rall—had been quartered in the houses along Warren and Broad streets between State and Hanover streets since December 14. A few were quartered just south of the Assunpink Creek on Broad Street. The Sixteenth Light Dragoons were in the Friends meetinghouse, and the Jaegers occupied the Old Barracks on modern Willow Street and had a picket post at the Hermitage. Rall may have been a drunkard, as is often said, but he and his officers were competent soldiers. The men were well trained and disciplined, as they had proved at Fort Washington just six weeks before.

In addition to the picket post on the River Road at the Hermitage, there were others on Pennington Avenue near Calhoun Street and at the Assunpink Bridge, and a large one at South Broad and Bridge streets with a subpost in the ferry house at the river end of modern Ferry Street, and later in the Trent House at the foot of what is now Market Street. There was a very large company-size detachment at the drawbridge on Crosswicks Creek. The main guard post was on Brunswick Avenue near Montgomery Street.

For twenty-four hours from four o'clock each afternoon, one regiment, the “du jour” regiment, was fully dressed and quartered in the “alarm houses” ready to turn out in five minutes. This duty once every three days, in addition to a four-day rotating duty at the drawbridge and the many strong patrols that responded to militia harassment, kept the Hessian units dressed and alert sometimes for two days at a time. By Christmas day, as a result of this “du jour” rotation and other duties, many of the Hessians were so tired as to be hardly fit for duty.

In any army there is usually someone who never gets “the word.” Stephen's brigade had become the advance guard when the army moved out. Washington, at the head of the column, was most upset when he met a patrol (probably from the Fifth Virginia Regiment of Stephen's brigade) returning after having attacked the Hessians' Pennington Road post at eight o'clock Christmas night—

in violation of orders. The attack, which wounded four sentries, had alerted the garrison, as Washington had feared it would. Rall, having been warned repeatedly that some kind of an attack was imminent, turned out the "du jour" Rall Regiment, alerted the von Lossbergs, sent out numerous patrols from the pickets and guard stations, and reinforced the sentries. His low opinion of American military capabilities, however, eventually led him to conclude that the attack by the Virginia patrol had been the one about which he had been warned, and he relaxed the emergency measures at dawn. The patrol that had not got "the word" thus did much to assure a victory. Washington ordered them to lead the march back to Trenton.

The morning Jaegers' mounted patrol out of the Hermitage failed to go all the way to West Trenton as it had been ordered, thinking no one would know in the heavy snowstorm that they had not completed their mission. When it turned back, the patrol was only about a mile short of Sullivan's advancing column. If the crossing had not been delayed by weather and the difficulties of ferrying wagons, horses and cannon across the river, Sullivan would have run into the patrol. As it was, he was close behind when the returning patrol reported no sign of the enemy.

Far too many accounts of the battle of Trenton emphasize the alleged carousing and drunkenness of the Hessians celebrating Christmas. The rumors are true of Rall and perhaps some of his officers; others, however, apprehensive after receiving news from British Major General James Grant at Princeton on Christmas day of an impending attack, had confined their companies to quarters, ready for an alert even after the alarm described above. It is doubtful, therefore, that the rank and file had had time to become intoxicated. Even more significant, the artisans and peasants making up the Hessian units were usually devout Christians who would not think of getting drunk on a high holy day such as the two days of Christmas.

It would be in order here to say a few words about the structure of the American army and the weapons favored by the contending sides at Trenton. The American infantry regiment or battalion (most regiments were only one battalion) was supposed to consist of eight companies of about ninety men each, armed with muskets and bayonets. The officers might carry espontoons, muskets, or short muskets called fusils. Rifle units were, of course, armed with rifles which,

since they were not mass-produced, did not usually have bayonets.

The bayonet was the weapon relied on by trained, disciplined troops for the last sixty yards of the attack or used in wet weather or at night, when firing a musket was impossible or dangerous. At this time, the Americans did not have many bayonets, did not like to face any, and usually did not even know how to use them—a situation which would not change until Inspector General Friedrich von Steuben organized the training in the winter of 1777-1778.

If the Americans disliked the bayonet, the British and Hessians neither liked nor had the rifle. The sight of a man in a rifle shirt was enough to make them cautious, so much so that Washington favored the rifle shirt as a field uniform whenever possible. The rifle had been invented in Germany around 1700, but American gunsmiths in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia had lengthened it and made it much more accurate. Almost any rifleman could hit a man at one hundred fifty yards while marksmen could hit a target the size of a man's head at two hundred fifty yards. The rifle was almost unknown in New England. The fame of riflemen who came to help at Boston spread rapidly, and Washington eagerly sought rifle units. The rifle was slower to load and easier to foul, and, as indicated, it had no bayonet; riflemen were therefore not used as line or main attack units. The rifle regiments and battalions had been decimated at Long Island by improper use, but the surviving units were being reorganized and expanded as Washington retreated across New Jersey. The Hessian Jaegers were equipped with short, inaccurate rifles with no bayonets. No other European units had rifles until Howe's Philadelphia campaign of 1777.

Each battalion in a British or Hessian regiment had one company of large, strong men—shock troops if you will—known as a grenadier company. These companies were withdrawn from the battalions to form composite grenadier regiments. Von Donop had three such units, composed of grenadier companies from fourteen regiments, which he was to quarter in Bordentown and Burlington. Similarly, each British regiment had a light infantry company of small agile men to put out in front as skirmishers and scouts. General Howe, the advocate of these troops in the British army, brigaded them like the grenadiers. The Hessians used the Jaegers in this capacity. Except for the Philadelphia Associators, the Americans had no light infantry companies, but riflemen could, on occasion, perform well in this capacity.

TO WEST
TRENTON

TO PENNINGTON

TO PRINCETON

TRENTON

8-10AM 26 Dec 1776

N

TO WEST
TRENTON

THE HERMITAGE

ST. CLAIR

MERCER

GLOVER

SARGENTS

BEATTY FERRY

OLD BARRACKS

TRENTON FALLS

PRESENT CALHOUN ST. BRIDGE

HEAD of TIDE

ICE

JAM

TRENTON FERRY

HOWELLS

COOPER SHOP

STEPHANS

BEAKES LANE

MAIN GUARD

STIRLING

STIRLING

RALL

LOSS

FRIENDS MEETING - 16 L.D.

KNYPHAUSEN

MILL

ST. CLAIR

GLOVER

KNYPHAUSEN FUGITIVES

TO PRINCETON

TO PRINCETON

HESSIANS SOUTH OF ASSUNPINK BAND CAMP FOLLOWERS 16TH LIGHT DRAGOONS

TO BORDENTOWN

BRITISH
AMERICAN
ARTILLERY
BUILDING

EWINGS BRIGADE

① ②

0 2000 FT. 1 MILE

KEMBLE WIDMER

Most Hessian regiments were fusileer regiments containing eight “body” companies armed with muskets, and one company of grenadiers. These were employed primarily to hurl hand grenades at the enemy, but also carried muskets. The Rall Regiment was unique in that all its companies were grenadier.

The American attack on Trenton began when Greene’s column struck the Pennington Road picket at about eight o’clock on the morning of the twenty-sixth, and drove them back into town. (See map, p. 16.)

At about the same time the Jaegers were retreating along the River Road (or State Street) before Sullivan. Rall had kept all his artillery, two three-pounders per regiment, together near the “alarm houses” and his headquarters, which were about opposite the Episcopal church on North Warren Street. As the Rall Regiment again formed and started moving up Warren, he ordered the artillery to push closer to the Americans, now in strength atop a rise near the location of the modern Battle Monument, where Broad and Warren streets converge. A short artillery duel ensued in which most of the Hessian artillery horses and several of the cannoners were killed. As he dashed down Warren Street to help capture the Hessian guns, Lieutenant James Monroe, a future president of the United States, who was part of a detail specifically equipped to spike or drag away the enemy guns, was wounded — nearly fatally.

As the Americans got into town they fought most unfairly, going into houses to dry their weapons and then firing on the Hessians from cellar, attic, or other windows and from behind fences and other shelter or concealment. The Hessians seemed to have no one to attack, yet were falling as they attempted to form. Rall ordered the Rall and Lossberg men into an orchard east of Montgomery Street, about at Perry Street. There they were to turn about and attack back into town with some cohesion. The American artillery was by now blasting down both Broad and Warren; de Fermoy’s riflemen were encircling the Hessians to the east, driving toward the Assunpink and sealing off any escape toward Princeton. At this point in the battle Rall was mortally wounded.

Because of a mistake in orders and perhaps also because Sullivan’s artillery was now firing east along State Street, the Knyphausen Regiment was still south of State and east of Broad. As its

members watched, the other two regiments were surrounded and forced to surrender. The Knyphausens moved into a field near the present junction of Stockton and Front streets where a mill pond blocked retreat across the Assunpink. With their artillery stuck in the mud and their muskets too wet to fire, they began receiving fire from the men and artillery of Colonel Paul Sargent's brigade south of the Assunpink. They too surrendered as the dying Rall was carried from the field.

As Sullivan pushed back the Jaegers on River Road, the Sixteenth Light Dragoons fled toward Bordentown. The Jaegers, the surviving artillerymen, the bandsmen, and the camp followers managed to cross the Assunpink Bridge before Sullivan occupied it and deployed along the south bank. All of these people and the Hessians at posts south of the creek fled to Bordentown. About fifty Knyphausens forded the head of the mill pond, neck deep, and reached Princeton late in the evening of the twenty-sixth after a frightening journey. In all, some six hundred Hessians escaped. Almost nine hundred were captured with all guns and equipment. Another one hundred lay dead or wounded in Trenton after less than two hours of utter confusion during a heavy snowstorm.

Washington began his return to the ferries almost immediately, but escorting the prisoners across required all night. Some units did not reach their hutments until three in the afternoon, after a forty-eight hour round trip of about thirty miles in a severe storm with a battle thrown in. Is it any wonder that about half the army was reported unfit for duty on December 28, 1776?

Ewing did not carry out his part of the plan, which was to cross the Delaware below Trenton to close the road to Bordentown. Many accounts imply that he was too easily foiled by the ice at Trenton ferry. If he had carried out his part of the plan, probably most of the Hessians would have been moved south of the Assunpink to meet Ewing's attack and thus could have escaped to Bordentown even though Sullivan blocked the Assunpink Bridge. However, when ice coming down the Delaware meets an incoming tide it piles up at the foot of the rapids called Trenton Falls. It takes only four hours to pile ice five feet deep for nearly half a mile down the river, and across its entire width except for three or four narrow channels of rushing water twenty or thirty feet wide. There is no conceivable

way for anyone to cross such an ice jam, much less make a surprise attack. The ice jam can last almost a week and increase in length and thickness for several days, or it can break up in a day or two as it did in December 1776.

Cadwalader's forces, attempting to cross to attack in the Burlington area, had a somewhat different problem. Ice builds up along the New Jersey bank of the Delaware estuary. Ferries, barges, and galleys could function across most of the river but would have to land men and equipment at the edge of the ice. It is possible for men and even horses to cross the ice, but wrestling a gun, limber or wagon across it would be difficult, exhausting, and time-consuming.

Cadwalader decided he did not wish to take the risk and after landing his riflemen (light infantry) he recalled them. He crossed his entire force on December 27 and cautiously surrounded Burlington; learning that the Hessians had left, he proceeded north to Bordentown.

News of Washington's victory caused von Donop to withdraw all his units to Crosswicks and then to Allentown, where he stayed until ordered to Princeton on December 28. The British commanders were receiving reports which not only exaggerated rebel strength but had Washington ready to attack again at many points, from Rocky Hill in the north to Mount Holly in the south. Cornwallis, about to leave New York for England, was ordered by Howe to proceed at once to Princeton. He picked up the British units as he rode down the winter line to Princeton, where he arrived on the evening of January 1, 1777.

Washington, in Pennsylvania with an army most of whose enlistments would expire on December 31 (about twenty-eight hundred would remain), was on the horns of a dilemma. Cadwalader, with a force of about sixteen hundred men who would continue to serve after the new year, was in a vulnerable position at Bordentown on December 28. General Thomas Mifflin, with a brigade of about fifteen hundred completely inexperienced militiamen, would join him about December 30. For Washington to pull these forces back to Pennsylvania would be to retreat, leaving Philadelphia exposed to a British advance and nullifying the success at Trenton. But if he moved into New Jersey, he might be trapped against the Delaware and he did not know how many of the veterans would remain with his army. He chose to gamble that he could retain

enough veterans to give the British another beating. With a great deal more difficulty, because of the ice, than on Christmas night, he crossed again to Trenton during the next two days and ordered Cadwalader to join him. (See map, p. 21.)

Washington and other ranking officers now began an appeal to the Continentals whose time was up to stay for six weeks more. They promised an unauthorized bounty of \$10 per man. Most of the best-trained and best-equipped regiments—Colonel John Glover's Marblehead Massachusetts, Colonel John Haslet's Delawares, Brigadier General William Smallwood's Marylanders—as well as most of the men in the Virginia regiments and some of those from New England, rejected the bounty and would stay no longer. As a result, most of the brigades of General William Alexander (Lord Stirling), Stephen, and Glover ceased to exist.

Washington used the departing Colonel George Weedon's Third Virginia Regiment to escort, on December 28, the Hessian prisoners to Philadelphia. Similarly, he used Stephen's brigade—except a few of Colonel Charles Scott's Fifth Virginia Regiment, who for some reason stayed—to escort the baggage and three pieces of heavy artillery to Burlington the night of January 2 as he prepared to meet the British again at Trenton.

Roche de Fermoy had Colonel Nicholas Hausseger's Pennsylvania-Maryland Rifle Battalion and Colonel Edward Hand's Pennsylvania Rifle Regiment. Hand's riflemen apparently decided to stay. Since Hausseger's were enlisted for three years, as were Colonel Hugh Stephenson's Maryland-Virginia Rifle Regiment, these regiments would stay. Captain Thomas Forrest's battery (probably with General Hugh Mercer's brigade at the battle of Trenton) and Stephenson's regiment were transferred to General Roche de Fermoy, and on January 1 he was sent with this reconstituted brigade to Lawrenceville to delay Cornwallis in his advance to attack Washington at Trenton. This assignment was a rearguard operation where, by utilizing every natural obstacle, de Fermoy would repeatedly force the enemy to deploy while the Continentals retreated at the last possible moment.

The British outposts north of Lawrenceville along Eight Mile Run (Shipetaukin Creek) were only three miles from the American lines south of Lawrenceville along the Five Mile Run (Little Shabakunk Creek). The British started an hour or two before dawn but

LAWRENCEVILLE

TO PRINCETON

BRITISH OUTPOSTS
NIGHT OF JAN. 1-2

2nd TRENTON BATTLE OF THE ASSUNPINK 2 January 1777

KOEHLER

MINNIGERODE

16TH LD.

BLOCK

LINSING

16TH LIGHT DRAGOONS

LITTLE
SHABAKUNK

PENN. MD.
RIFLE BR.

① NOON
2 JAN.
HAND
1ST. CONT.
RIFLES

GREAT BEAR
SWAMP

MINNIGERODE
ATTACK REPULSED

MIRY

ST. CLAIR

MIFFLIN

WASHINGTON TO
PRINCETON
MIDNIGHT TO 7AM

② 4PM

5PM

BRITISH BIVOUAC
NIGHT
JAN. 2-3

TO PRINCETON

STOCKTON
HOLLOW

③ 5:30
UNTIL DARK

MODERN R.R.

5TH
VA.

MERCER

CADWALADER

HESSIAN ATTACK ACROSS
BRIDGE AFTER DARK

HITCHCOCK

EWING

PA.-MD.

HAND

CADWALADER

MIFFLIN

ARRIVE
TRENTON
7AM 2 JAN

TRENTON FALLS

TIDAL
DELAWARE
RIVER

0 1 MILE 2

TO
BORDENTOWN

BRITISH
AMERICAN
ARTILLERY

had difficulty forming their columns on the road, which was knee-deep in mud from torrential rains during the night. Action began in the late morning when rebel riflemen shot a mounted Jaeger near the wooded bank of the Little Shabakunk. The grenadiers from the von Block and von Linsingen Regiments, leading the British column to restore the Hessian honor that had been soiled by Rall's defeat, deployed and advanced, but found nothing on the far bank of the creek.

Roche de Fermoy, later to disgrace himself at Ticonderoga in July of 1777, suddenly and inexplicably rode off to Trenton, leaving Colonel Hand in command, but the strategy was not altered. The king's troops were forced to deploy again at the Shabakunk and, finally, a third time at Stockton Hollow, a small ravine now occupied by the railroad line near modern Helene Fuld Hospital. This time Forrest's battery, firing from hastily prepared emplacements, forced the British to bring up their artillery. By the time the infantry attacked it was nearly dark. The riflemen withdrew to harass the Jaegers and British light infantry from houses and fences as they had done before. When at last they ran for the bridge over the Assunpink or waded across near the Delaware, Colonel Daniel Hitchcock's New England Brigade gave covering fire. Cannon on the south bank turned back several attempts by the Hessians to storm the bridge. A few who got over and into the mill could not get back and were captured later in the evening.

During the day Washington had entrenched infantry and emplaced artillery on the south side of the Assunpink, from the Delaware River east past the deep ford at Henry's Mill and the shallow ford at Phillips's Mill to the natural obstacles of Bear Swamp and Miry Run. This line ran about four miles, from about the Delaware to modern Whitehead Road.

Failing to get enough troops over the Assunpink to form a bridgehead, Cornwallis bivouacked north of Phillips's Mill in the area of the present U.S. Route #1 traffic circle, north of Trenton proper. He intended to storm across the ford in the morning and roll Washington's line up against the Delaware. Colonel Sir William Erskine advised Cornwallis that Washington would not be there in the morning, but Cornwallis disagreed. Later that night he discounted reports of troop movements behind Washington's campfires. As is often the case, the commander did not want to believe

that his plan might go wrong.

In their memoirs several American generals claimed the credit for suggesting the daring night march around the British army which, by dawn on January 3, had Washington's army on the move between Cornwallis and Princeton. The plan of deception would seem to be Washington's alone. He and several of his staff officers knew of the so-called Quaker Road, a shorter route to Princeton than that noted in British accounts—through Cranbury and Allentown. Washington had placed a patrol near the Quaker Bridge in the late afternoon of January 2, 1777. The patrol remained at the bridge until the army reached them some time early on the morning of the third.

At a military council, guides were selected, the brigades and divisions under Greene and Sullivan were reorganized, the order of march determined, and the decision made to hazard the deception and march to Princeton. A map of the British positions at Princeton provided by Cadwalader as reported by a "very intelligent young gentleman just now returned from Princeton," was probably the final piece of intelligence Washington needed to assure him that his plan would succeed.

Washington placed his riflemen near the Delaware where low ground and the bridge made the Assunpink least effective as a barrier. His veteran troops held the rest of the first line, and the less experienced units waited in reserve. The positions of the units would be almost the same in the order of march.

Apparently Colonel Arthur St. Clair, holding the east end of the line with the remnants of Glover's and Sargent's brigades, and Mifflin pulled out first. Cadwalader, the reserve behind Mercer, and then Mercer, on the line opposite the main British bivouac, were next. Next in line was Hitchcock's brigade, guarding the bridge with Ewing's militia as his reserve; finally, Hand's brigade brought up the rear. What had been Colonel Samuel Griffin's brigade of South Jersey militia, now under Colonel Silas Newcomb, kept the fires going, discharged some iron cannon (less reliable than those made of brass, and therefore expendable), and made the noises of digging. They were to disappear into southern New Jersey at dawn, but some hurried after Washington instead. The light infantry companies of the Philadelphia Associators were the advance and rear guards.

A sharp drop in temperature late in the evening of the second froze the mud and made troop movement with some speed possible. Some of Mifflin's brigade panicked and ran all the way to Bordentown; tree stumps still in place in a recently cleared section of road slowed the march; ice caused the horses to slip; exhaustion caused men to walk in their sleep and sometimes to fall. Otherwise the American march was uneventful, and it was undiscovered. The bridge across Stony Brook had to be reinforced for the artillery, but by dawn, about 7:00 a.m., the Americans were being sorted out, closed up, and reorganized on the north side of Stony Brook, south of the Quaker meetinghouse about three miles southwest of Princeton.

Events were to spoil whatever plan Washington had in mind, so we will never know whether he planned to "beat up the Princeton garrison" or to march on by the lower road, attacking only if discovered. Since his troops at this time were nearly exhausted, it is difficult to think he would have risked an attack, yet he must have expected to be discovered. Whatever was planned, destruction of the bridge at Worth's Mill would delay Cornwallis in his pursuit.

General Sullivan was to take his brigades along the back or lower road shown on the "spy map," Mercer was to take his brigade out of the column where this road turned off and follow the main road along the brook to Worth's Mill in the Quaker hamlet of Stony Brook. There he would tear down the bridge of the main Lawrenceville-Princeton Road to obstruct Cornwallis when he returned to Princeton. Cadwalader and following brigades would use the back road.

The night before, Cornwallis had ordered Lieutenant Colonel Charles Mawhood, commander of the British Fourth Brigade with understrength companies of the Seventeenth, Fifty-fifth, and Fortieth Regiments of British Foot and some Sixteenth Light Dragoons (one troop mounted), to leave Princeton for Trenton before dawn on the third with a number of supply wagons. The mounted Sixteenth Light Dragoons and the Seventeenth Infantry crossed Stony Brook at Worth's Mill as Mercer approached from the south. Their wagons, followed by the Fifty-fifth, came down to the brook on the east slope as the Seventeenth topped the hill on the west side.

Some officers in the rear of Sullivan's division saw this movement. At the same time the British saw the lead elements of Sulli-

van's force. Thinking the Americans were a small unit threatening Princeton, Mawhood sent word back to the Fifty-fifth and ordered the Seventeenth to return on the double to support the Fifty-fifth at the rear of the column of wagons. At this time neither force knew the full extent of the forces which would soon oppose it. The Americans did not know of the British columns, having seen only the head of the column at the top of the hill. The British could not see Mercer in the ravine of Stony Brook or the bulk of the Americans marching through the woods south of the Friends Meeting House.

The Princeton battlefield is very small, and its topography, so important to what follows, is difficult to describe. (See map, p. 26.) The British on the road to Lawrenceville were in the valley of a small brook flowing west to enter Stony Brook (which here flows nearly due south) just downstream from Worth's Mill. South of this tributary and parallel to it there are two east-west ridges separated by a low valley. The house of William Clark with outbuildings and a large orchard, was near the crest of the northerly ridge at its Princeton (east) end. The home and outbuildings of Clark's brother Thomas were on the southern ridge, nearer Stony Brook and the Quaker meetinghouse. Fences separated the properties.

The Thomas Clark house and some of his farm buildings still stand on the site today. They face a gentle southerly slope and overlook the back road, which was being used by Washington's army. This road parallels Stony Brook, which here flows east, and passes beyond the village of Princeton before it rises to the level of the plateau upon which the town and the William Clark property are situated. Thus, the road, low and invisible from the town, gave Washington the alternatives of moving undiscovered past the Princeton garrison or of appearing suddenly in attack formation from the south side of town. The American troops were hidden from any British units until they reached the crest of the ridge occupied by the Thomas Clark house or an even higher hill to the east, now called Mercer Heights.

General Mercer, alerted to the British presence, turned at right angles to Stony Brook. Still hidden from the Lawrenceville Road, he climbed the northerly spur and headed for high ground east of William Clark's orchard. A British dragoon appeared for an instant to the east and then rode off. He apparently told Mawhood of this new body of troops. As Mercer's men moved eastward through the

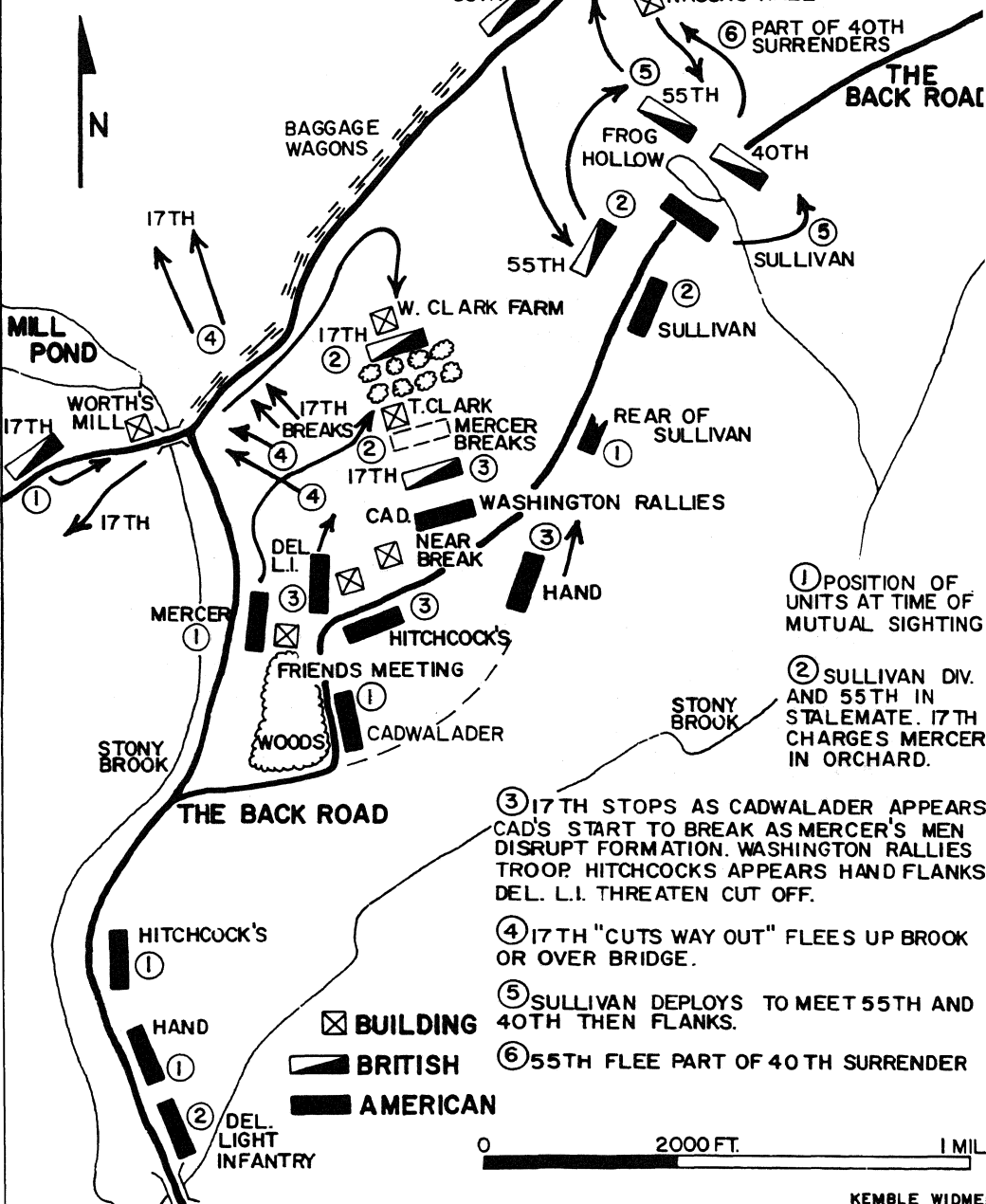
HILLSBOROUGH

55TH
PART OF 40TH
"ADVANCE TO
NEW BRUNSWICK"

TO
NEW BRUNSWICK

PRINCETON

3 January 1777



orchard the British, concealed behind a fence at the north edge of the orchard, rose and fired on their flank. The Americans, mostly riflemen, wheeled, advanced, and drove the British north, but suddenly the British attacked them with bayonets and drove them south.

Captain Daniel Niel of the Eastern Company of New Jersey Artillery had hardly gotten his two guns into action before the advancing Seventeenth overwhelmed them. In the meantime, Cadwalader's men heard the firing and approached. Topping the rise by the Thomas Clark house, they caused the Seventeenth to pause behind one of the cross fences. But Mercer's retreating men interfered with their effort to form a line as they advanced to within range of the Seventeenth. Then they caught the panic too and began to break.

Washington rode between the opposing lines, which were only about fifty yards apart, seeking to rally those who were retreating. Each side fired a volley, and a new staff officer named John Fitzgerald was so sure Washington would be killed that he covered his face with his hat. When the smoke cleared, however, Washington was unhurt. The Americans continued to fall back.

Meanwhile, the American Captain Thomas Moulder put his battery into action east of the Thomas Clark house. Protected by Captain Thomas Rodney's Delaware militia, his guns broke up a flanking movement by the Sixteenth Light Dragoons, reassured the retreating infantry so that Washington and other officers could begin to form a line, and bought time for Hitchcock's New Englanders to come up. As Hand's riflemen at the end of the American column began to move in between the Seventeenth and Fifty-fifth (which was on high ground east of the Clark farm), the British position became desperate. Now, badly outnumbered, outflanked, and suffering increasing casualties, the Seventeenth fell back and finally broke for the bridge at Worth's Mill. Hand's riflemen and the Philadelphia City Troop pursued some of them up Stony Brook nearly to Pennington. Others, covered by the Light Dragoons, were able to cross the bridge and head for Lawrenceville to bring word of another defeat to Cornwallis.

The Fifty-fifth, on learning of the American presence, had moved south to occupy Mercer Heights, where they were surprised to find Sullivan's brigades and the head of the American column

below them on the "back road." It was a complete stalemate. If either the American or the British force tried to help its comrades fighting on the Clark farms, it would expose its flank to the enemy.

When the Seventeenth retreated, the Fortieth, which had been left to defend Princeton but had moved out to assist when they heard the firing, formed up with the Fifty-fifth and deployed to block the way into Princeton. Sullivan advanced, deployed, and ordered some of his men to flank the British line. Most of the Fortieth retreated to Nassau Hall, while the Fifty-fifth "advanced to New Brunswick via Hillsboro" — which really means they retreated north out of Princeton, crossed the Millstone near Griggstown with some of the supply wagons, and retreated to New Brunswick with the news of Princeton.

Nassau Hall was surrounded and the Fortieth soon surrendered. Three British regiments had been defeated by an American army which had not fought at Trenton ten days before. Mercer's brigade was only a fragment of the force that had fought at Trenton. Cadwalader's and Hitchcock's brigades had been trying to cross the Delaware from Bristol and thus had not been at Trenton. Hand's riflemen at the rear of the column had been at Trenton but had done little except to close the circle around the surrendering Hessians. The other brigades and regiments from the Trenton fighting that had not left to go home were part of Sullivan's division facing the Fifty-fifth. Thus, with a few notable exceptions, men who had not been at Trenton engaged in the most intense fighting of the battle of Princeton.

Knowing Cornwallis would soon be returning from Trenton, Washington collected blankets and other stores, burned a supply of hay, exchanged some cannon for better ones, destroyed the bridge at Worth's Mill, and got his exhausted army on the move toward Kingston. Most of the men had been marching, fighting, or digging trenches since New Year's morning, at least forty-eight hours before, with almost no time for rest or food.

Near Kingston, artillery delayed the British dragoons while Rodney's Delawares broke up the bridge across the Millstone River. The Philadelphia City Troop, which formed to accept the charge of the dragoons as the cannoneers dragged the guns toward the Millstone River Bridge, rescued the guns by seizing the drag ropes as they retreated.

Washington, with no fresh troops available, turned north up the Millstone to camp that night at Griggstown. Cornwallis rushed his battalions through the dusk to New Brunswick to protect a war chest of £70,000 in gold. Had the Americans captured it, they would have had enough money to run the war for a year or more.

After waiting some three or four days at Pluckemin to gather his army — many had fallen asleep on the way, and some had had to make wide detours after chasing British fugitives — Washington went into winter quarters at Morristown. The British departed from all of New Jersey except for a perimeter anchored on Perth Amboy and New Brunswick. For the rest of the war the British did not occupy much of New Jersey beyond this perimeter, though they made many raids and sometimes sent large forces into the state for several weeks at a time. The Hackensack Valley and the valleys of the lower Raritan and Millstone became no-man's-lands controlled by neither the British nor the Americans.

The English historian, G.M. Trevelyan, summarized the American effort from Trenton through Princeton when he said of the ten days from December 25, 1776, to January 3, 1777: "This was a long and a severe ordeal and yet it may be doubted whether so small a number of men ever employed so short a space of time with greater or more lasting results upon the history of the world."

For Further Reading

One of the best modern accounts of the New Jersey campaign of 1776 is Richard M. Ketchum, *The Winter Soldiers* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1973) which describes the course of the revolutionary war through the battle of Princeton. It is detailed, but clearly and popularly written. In the same vein is Earl Schenck Miers, *Crossroads of Freedom* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1971), which also treats the early stages of the war in New Jersey. Older but still useful is Leonard Lundin, *Cockpit of the Revolution: The War for Independence in New Jersey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940; reprinted by Octagon Books, New York, 1972). Mark M. Boatner III in *Encyclopedia of the American*

Revolution (New York: David McKay Co., 1966) gives brief descriptions of the three battles of the Christmas campaign and biographical sketches of the main performers.

Of more specific interest are Alfred Hoyt Bill, *The Campaign of Princeton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948); Samuel S. Smith, *The Battle of Trenton* and *The Battle of Princeton* (Monmouth Beach, N.J.: Philip Freneau Press, 1965, 1967); and William S. Stryker, *The Battles of Trenton and Princeton* (New York, 1898; reprint: Spartanburg, S.C.: The Reprint Co., 1967).

John W. Jackson, *The Pennsylvania Navy 1775-1781* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1974) describes the growth, structure and activities of this state navy which played an important role in military affairs on the lower Delaware River.

Finally the reader may wish to consult several other pamphlets in this series which, dealing with military affairs, shed additional light on the major figures of the era and the revolutionary war in New Jersey. Lewis F. Owen, *The Revolutionary Struggle in New Jersey, 1776-1783* presents an overview of the war that skims the major battles and concentrates on the war in the state as a guerilla operation by both sides. Mark E. Lender, *The New Jersey Soldier*, evaluates the New Jersey militaman and Continental soldier as folk hero and describes his origins and reasons for fighting. Thomas Fleming, *The Battle of Springfield* and Samuel S. Smith, *The Battle of Monmouth* offer detailed treatments of the other major battles which took place in the state. All of the above were published by the New Jersey Historical Commission, Trenton, 1975.

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