

ON THE BRINK OF DISASTER

George Washington and the American Revolution, 1775–1776

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The seeds of the American Revolution were sown as a consequence of the French and Indian War (1757–63). Faced with a heavy debt from the war, King George III and his ministers were intent on levying new taxes on the colonists who, the Crown reasoned, benefited from the victory over the French. The American colonists, on the other hand, reasoned that because they had fought alongside the British Regulars and helped win victory over the French and Indian hostiles, they were entitled to greater political freedoms from the British government. Political leaders in North America began to resist British policies and raised fundamental issues dealing with the inequality of powers, political rights and individual freedom. They wanted the right to representation, separation of church and state, and political independence. They opposed The Crown's policies of restriction of their commerce and of oppressive taxation.¹

However, for the ideas of an American Revolution to succeed, there first had to be victory over the British forces. The colonists had only citizen-soldiers loosely organised as militia units, commanded often by elected officers among whom only a handful had command experience of any sizeable fighting unit. The common wisdom was that the revolution had little chance of success. George III had the world's most powerful navy, a crack army and resources to also hire thousands of German mercenaries.

For the decade after the close of the French and Indian War, political tensions escalated. The hotbed of revolutionary spirit was Boston, Massachusetts, a town of 10,000 inhabitants. On a peninsula, it was connected to the mainland by a narrow neck. The topography of Boston and its environs was critical to understanding the events that developed in the first year of the Revolutionary War. Across the bay to the north was Charlestown, and to the south was Dorchester (Fig. 1). The tensions boiled over when in late 1773, patriots, disguised as Indians, boarded a ship in Boston harbour and threw hundreds of chests of tea into the bay to protest a new royal tax (the Boston Tea Party). As punishment for this rebellious act, the British government quartered troops in the town of Boston and had Royal Navy ships control the harbour.

Open rebellion erupted in early spring, 1775 when British troops marched from Boston, on an April night, to seize a cache of colonial arms in nearby Concord. Two riders, one a silversmith, were dispatched by the Committee of Safety to sound the alarm. Immortalised in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, 'Paul Revere's Ride' has become part of American folklore. En route from Boston to Concord, the British Regulars skirmished with a small band of militia in the village of Lexington. The British troops brushed the militia aside and marched to Concord where they destroyed the colonial arms. On their return the British column found itself in an alarmed countryside, teeming with armed militia, firing at them from behind rock walls and trees. Exhausted from the long march and continual fighting, the British soldiers barely made it back to the safety of Boston on the evening of 19 April. Over the next days and weeks, colonial militia poured in from the countryside and took up positions around the British on the Boston peninsula.

Two months later, on 17 June, British Commanding General Thomas Gage awakened to the news that the Americans had fortified a new position across the harbour, above the hamlet of Charlestown (Fig. 2). His engineers informed [him](#) that the American position was called Bunker's Hill. From their positions, American cannon threatened the town of Boston. Four British warships immediately moved into the Charles River and opened fire on the rebel positions while General Gage ordered Major General William Howe to prepare assault troops to take Bunker Hill. Gage and Howe were confident the rebels would flee as soon as the British infantry line advanced toward them.

On the Charlestown Peninsula, the Americans were under command of two militia leaders, General William Prescott and General Joseph Warren, a prominent Boston physician. They watched the mighty, scarlet-clad British regiments being ferried from Boston to the beaches of Charlestown. American morale was high; they were well-entrenched and in strong positions [to pick off](#) the British [as](#) they advanced up a steep hill to get to the militia's positions.

To Howe's horror, the British frontal attack



Fig. 1 Detail from Thomas Jefferys, 'A Map of the most inhabited part of New England containing the Provinces of Massachusetts Bay and New Hampshire...', 1774. Jefferys (1719–1771) was Geographer to King George III. His *American Atlas*, first published posthumously in 1776, is one of the most important atlases of the period. Boston was on a peninsula jutting into the harbour. To the north was 'Charles Town', site of the Battle of Bunker Hill in June, 1775, and to the south was 'Dorchester Neck', occupied by the Americans in March, 1775.



Fig. 2 Lieutenant Page, 'A plan of the Action at Bunker Hill on the 17th of June 1775 Between His Majesty's Troops... by Lieut. Page', 1775. Lieutenant Thomas Hyde Page, a participant at the battle, drew the map which was engraved by William Faden, see Figure 4. When the Americans fortified Bunker Hill above the hamlet of Charles Town, their cannon threatened the British in Boston. British General Gage ordered a frontal attack on the well-entrenched Americans. After three assaults, the British captured the hill but took withering casualties.

crumbled before the colonists' massed musket fire, coming virtually as a single sheet of lethal flame and lead. Even a second British frontal assault was beaten back by the gritty, determined militia. Appealing to the honour of the brave British regulars, Howe then ordered a third assault. This wave made it into the American positions as the militia ran out of powder and ball. It became a scene of carnage in the redoubt as the Redcoats sought revenge on the retreating militia, most of whom were able to escape through the Charlestown neck to safety. Exhausted themselves, the Redcoats gained control of Bunker Hill but did not pursue the militia.

Three hundred miles to the south in Philadelphia, the American Continental Congress was debating as

how best to address their grievances to King George III. Simultaneously they were deciding on an American commander in chief. Although the seat of the war was in New England, Congress wanted unity on this matter among the thirteen colonies. Emerging as the unanimous choice was a Southerner who had seen service on the frontier in the French and Indian War. He was 43 years old, had an imposing military bearing and was a well-respected Virginian planter aristocrat. However, his military command experience was indeed limited; he had never led a unit larger than a regiment. His name was George Washington. Washington accepted the role with humility and left Philadelphia with his retinue for the 300 mile journey to Boston. He took command a few weeks after the

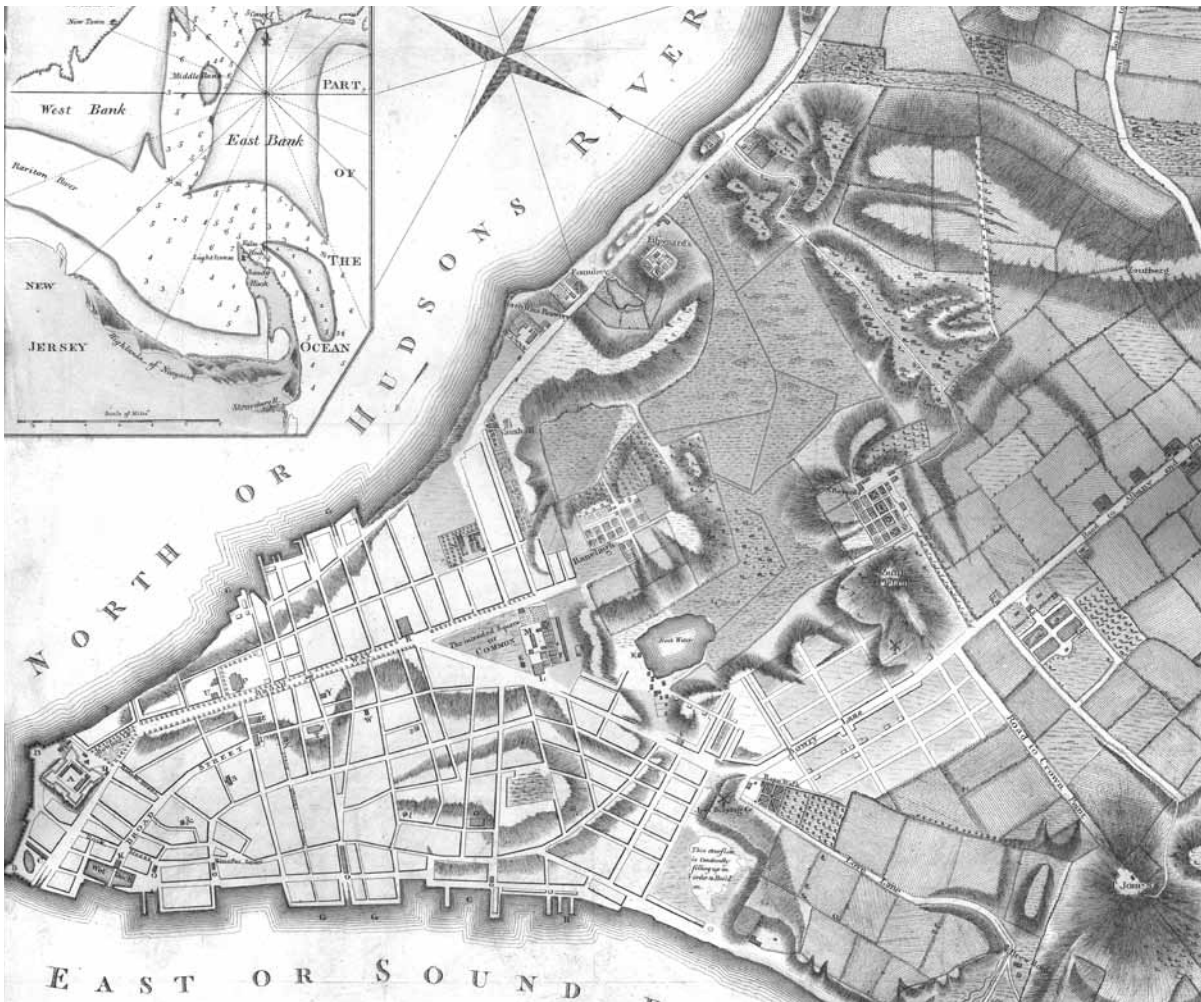


Fig. 3 Detail from: John Montresor, 'A plan of the City of New York and its Environs... John Montresor', 1776. Captain John Montresor, a British military engineer, drew this map. He was present at Lexington, Bunker Hill and Long Island. It was engraved by P. Andrews. New York City, with a population of 20,000 was the second largest city in North America. For the campaign of 1776, the British aimed to capture it and divide the hotbed New England colonies from the middle and southern colonies.

Battle of Bunker Hill.

From his early days, Washington was introduced to maps and mapmaking. At age 16, he accompanied a surveying team into the Blue Ridge Mountains and Shenandoah Valley of his native Virginia. The very next year he was appointed surveyor for Culpeper County, Virginia, most likely through the patronage of his mentor Lord Fairfax. His facility with maps served him well as many of his decisions were made after careful consideration of those in his possession. Throughout his career, Washington collected maps and 43 of these were bound together in an atlas, after his death. Today, this collection is in the Sterling Library at Yale University in Connecticut. The maps General Washington would have had available to him during the American Revolution helped him plan his manoeuvres and defences against the powerful British and Hessian forces. In particular, they depict the terrain and waterways of New England, New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, where the campaign of 1775–76 would take place. (See Works Consulted)

Throughout the summer, fall and winter of 1775–76, there was stalemate in Boston, the British holding the town and harbour and the Americans surrounding them. In the last days of winter, with his knowledge of the terrain gleaned from his maps, General Washington implemented a brilliant plan, taking full advantage of a catastrophic British oversight. They had left a promontory overlooking Boston, called Dorchester Heights, undefended, having convinced themselves that no army could possibly ascend and fortify this position (Fig. 1, lower centre). Washington rallied his men and overnight seized and fortified Dorchester Heights – stunning Gage and his command. The vaunted British Army had been outmanoeuvred. American guns could rain fire down upon them. The British had no choice but to evacuate Boston. General Gage negotiated that, if his withdrawal was not harassed, he promised to leave the town of Boston intact. If attacked, Gage warned, he would burn Boston to the ground. Washington agreed. The British embarked their army and a huge number of loyalists and sailed from Boston Harbour to the Canadian port of Halifax, Nova Scotia. As if predestined, this was already a festive day in Boston. It was 17 March, St Patrick's Day, 1776.

By early spring 1776, the War of the Revolution had been going well for the Americans, but the celebration in Washington's command was short-lived for they knew the British must return. The Americans were puzzled as to exactly where and when the war would

be renewed but reasoned that the most likely British target was New York City, the second largest city in North America. With a population of 20,000, it was smaller than Philadelphia, but far larger than the next most populous cities, Boston and Charleston, South Carolina each with 10,000 each.

New York City, situated on the southern tip of Manhattan Island, was already a bustling centre of trade (Fig. 3). Its geography favoured British operations: **situated** on an island **with** the network of the Hudson and East Rivers and New York Bay, **the city could** easily be controlled by the Royal Navy. Adding to its strategic importance for the British command, control of New York by the army and of the Hudson River by the Royal Navy would effectively separate the rebellious New England colonies from the middle and southern colonies.

Washington fretted about the seemingly impossible task of defending New York, but Congress had ordered him to do just that. In April, anticipating the British attack, he sent a contingent to build defences of the city. By early summer, Washington received intelligence that a large British fleet had been spotted off the New England coast and was headed south. This was the news he had been waiting for. He marched his army 200 miles to New York and began to deploy them to await the battle. When the British fleet sailed into New York Bay, their hearts sank. They witnessed the largest fleet ever sent into American waters, more than a 100 ships carrying 30,000 British troops and German mercenaries. One American observer said that there were so many masts of the British fleet that New York Bay looked like 'all London was afloat'.³

The British Army was now under command of General Howe, His brother Admiral Richard Howe, called 'Black Dick' by his men, owing to his swarthy complexion **was in command of the** Royal Navy. In late July 1776 the brothers disembarked the army at Staten Island to refit after the long voyage from Halifax. They spent the next four weeks on Staten Island preparing for the attack on Washington's men. Finally, in late August, the British crossed Lower New York Bay near the Verazanno Narrows and landed on western Long Island at Gravesend Bay to begin their assault on the American positions in Brooklyn. (Fig 4, lower centre).

Washington positioned most of his army in strong defences on Long Island – a front line on the Heights of Guian and a second line in redoubts closer to the East River. So secure was Washington in his position that he chose not to oppose the British landing at Gravesend.



Fig. 4 Detail from William Faden, 'A plan of New York Island with a part of Long Island, Staten Island, & East New Jersey, with a particular Description of the Engagement ... 27th August 1776', 1776. William Faden (1749–1836) replaced Thomas Jeffreys as Cartographer to the King and produced many of the most important maps of the war. The British landed on Staten Island (lower left) and resoundingly defeated the Americans in Brooklyn in late August. Washington and his army retreated to Manhattan Island.



Howe took up positions fronting on the Heights of Guian. On the morning of 27 August, he sent two columns – one British and one Hessian – against the American line on the heights. At the start of the battle, the American generals were pleased with how things were going. The two enemy columns failed to advance against the strong, barricaded American position.

Shortly thereafter the Americans became confused when they heard cannon and musket fire coming through the woods to their left. Fear struck them when they saw whole regiments of Regulars sweeping toward them from their rear. General Howe, always a brilliant tactician, had caught the Americans in his trap – for the two columns in front were merely feints. The main British-Hessian column under Howe himself had

been on an all-night march through 'Flatland', around the virtually unguarded American left. Howe's main column smashed into the American rear, and the two columns on the American front began their attack in earnest. The rout was on; Howe's flanking manoeuvre resulted in thousands of Americans being captured, killed or wounded. Among the Americans captured was General John Sullivan, a hard-fighting Irishman from New Hampshire. Sullivan was Washington's second in command; his capture was a mighty blow.

The army on Long Island was saved from annihilation only by the determined resistance of the American right wing, fighting under General William Alexander. Alexander's men gave precious time for American contingents to jump into Gowanus Creek,

wade or swim to safety across **Gowanus Creek**, and, and limp back from the heights to the redoubts on the East River.

A man full of confidence, Howe rested his troops. His virtually unscathed army had the Americans hemmed in from their front, and the Royal Navy controlled the river, preventing any escape to Manhattan. It had been a perfect day for him. He had completely out-generaled Washington and planned to mop up the survivors the next morning.

That night Washington was rowed from Manhattan to the small American enclave at Brooklyn Heights. His Council of War concluded that their position was untenable and that they must evacuate to Manhattan. They would have to cross the East River knowing fully of the mortal threat if uncovered by Admiral , **'Black Dick's'** marauding Royal Navy ships. Their sole

hope rested on seamen from Marblehead, Massachusetts. These tough, courageous sailors were under command of flinty Col John Glover and could handle small boats in any conditions. As the Americans prepared to board for the crossing to Manhattan, a **'pea-souper'** settled on the East River, immobilising the big Royal Navy warships. By what seemed to many as an act of Providence, the thick fog concealed their **crossing**. The next morning when Howe's troops stormed the American redoubts, all they found were campfires set to deceive them. Washington's Army had miraculously escaped.

Howe held Washington in disdain. He was furious that the amateur general had eluded him, but he then saw his opportunity to bring the war to a close. He aimed to bag all of Washington's Army on Manhattan Island (Fig. 5).

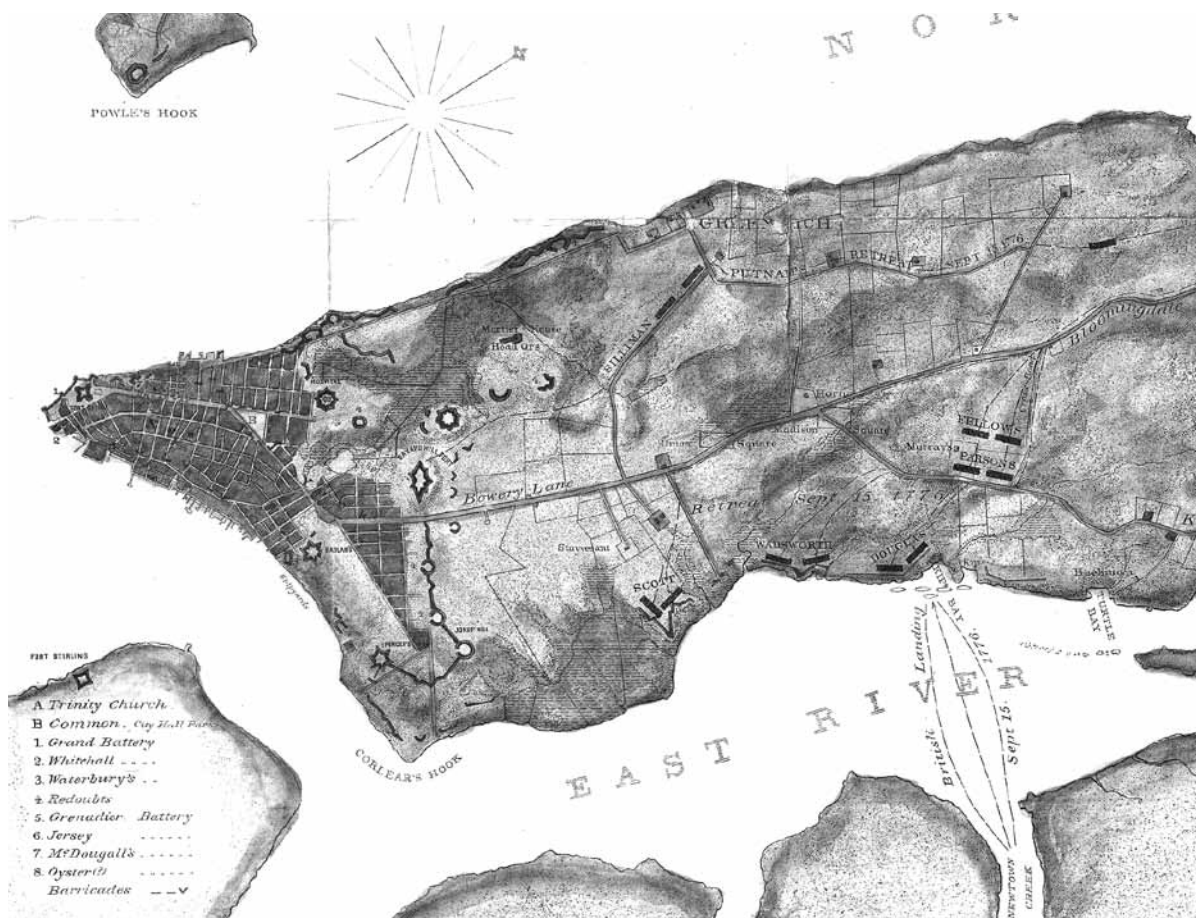


Fig. 5 Detail from: Henry P. Johnston, 'Map of New York City and Manhattan Island with the American Defences in 1776. Compiled by Henry P. Johnston', Julius Bien Lithographer, 1878. This map was included in Johnston's 'The Campaign of 1776 around New York and Brooklyn' in 1878, originally published by The Long Island Historical Society and reprinted by Da Capo Press, New York, 1971. Two and half weeks after the Battle of Brooklyn, the British attacked the Americans at Kip's Bay on Manhattan. The British and Hessian troops sent the American defenders into a headlong retreat to northern Manhattan. American troops in New York barely escaped capture by using a little known road up the west side of the island.

In the American camp, Washington was in a deep predicament. Manhattan, only 14 miles long and no more than 3 miles wide, presented another military dilemma: how to defend it against the expected attack from the wily General Howe. In the face of a larger enemy, Washington violated conventional military tactics and divided his army. He disposed about one quarter of his nearly 20,000 men in New York City, and almost half were stationed in upper Manhattan, either in Harlem Heights or at Kingsbridge, on the very northern tip of Manhattan, to guard their escape route, if needed, to Westchester. The remainder – only about 5,000 men – were spread thinly over the East River facing Long Island.

Two weeks went by without an attack, but then on 15 September, the raw recruits of the Connecticut militia at Kip's Bay awoke to a menacing sight. From their shallow trenches facing the East River, they peered out to see five huge Royal Navy warships, which had slipped into position less than 100 yards off shore with all their guns aimed at them. On that fateful morning, the Howe brothers arranged one more deadly surprise for the Americans. Across the mile-wide East River, in Newtown Creek, thousands of Redcoats and Hessians were boarding landing crafts to attack at Kip's Bay just as soon as the Navy's bombardment was complete. At 11 am, their heavy guns opened up in terrifying salvos, and with first broadsides, the Connecticut men panicked and ran inland. With no opposition, British Light Infantry and Grenadiers, and then the Hessians, landed and fanned out south, west and north.

Seven miles to the north in his headquarters in Harlem Heights, Washington heard the British naval gunfire, mounted up with four aides-de-camp and raced toward Kip's Bay. In a wheat field, the general's party ran into the retreating Connecticut militia, but despite his personal commands, they were too panicked to respond. In a rare display of emotion, Washington dashed his hat on the ground and muttered, 'Are these the men with which I am to defend America?'⁴. With British Rangers approaching, a dejected General Washington was **led** off to the north by his aides.

Howe's officers, meanwhile, drove their men inland, and Howe himself paused at Murray Hill, at the mansion of Robert Murray, a wealthy Loyalist merchant, and his wife, Mary Lindley Murray, who provided General Howe and his staff with a leisurely midday meal. Howe's troops had already reached Bloomingdale Road, the main route north. He had had no reason to hurry; his army had control of the key thoroughfare, and when

the Americans now in New York City reached this point, his men would easily bag them.

In the city itself, four miles to the south, American General Israel Putnam, a veteran of the French and Indian War, heard the naval cannon firing up at Kip's Bay and sized up the situation instantly. He and his command were in immediate danger of being cut off. Unless he got his men north, through the choke point and up to Harlem, they would be trapped by the British, who had landed above them. He knew he had better move fast. Spiking his precious cannon and leaving even vital supplies behind, Putnam began his march north on a little-travelled road and then through open country, up the west side of the island (as shown in Fig. 5, upper centre) for he had correctly surmised that the enemy must have control of the Bloomingdale Road and must be waiting there to pounce on his retreating troops. The energy exhibited by 'Old Put', as he was affectionately called by his rank and file, paid off handsomely that afternoon when his army slipped by the British holding their position on the Bloomingdale Road.

By the morning of 16 September, the British and their Hessian allies controlled the lower two thirds of Manhattan; Washington's Army **was** in control of the upper third, the area called Harlem Heights. That morning, the British sent a crack unit, the famed Black Watch Regiment, to probe the American lines. Each side sent in re-enforcements until the engagement became a large-scale to and fro battle. It was a tactical draw, but it marked the first time in the campaign that the Americans fought well against the British Regulars.

Washington solidified his defences with three well-fortified parallel lines, running east-west across the narrow northern part of Manhattan. His engineers constructed two strong points – one in Manhattan, called Fort Washington in his honour, and one in New Jersey directly opposite, called Fort Constitution. For most of the next month, there was again a stalemate, but in mid-October, the American generals learned that nearly all of Howe's army had been transported by boat to Throg's Neck, at the junction of the East River and Long Island Sound. Washington and his generals decided they must give up their positions in Harlem Heights and retreat from Manhattan to Westchester because remaining in Harlem Heights would put the American army in grave danger of being flanked once again. Down to 13–15,000 men with a huge baggage train, Washington's army began the march northward off Manhattan on 18 October, but there was one additional decision made by the American generals.

They decided to leave Ft Washington defended by 2,600 men who believed they could hold out, if attacked, for days and, if pressed, could descend from the Heights to the Hudson River and escape to Ft Constitution on the New Jersey side. Washington reluctantly agreed with the plan.

Washington marched via Kingsbridge, through Yonkers and Dobb's Ferry. The British were moving northwards – to the east of the Americans – through Westchester in pursuit. In late October, Washington took up a defensive position on the hills above White Plains, New York to, once more, await the Redcoats. On a brilliant autumn day, 28 October, Howe's troops attacked the American positions. The Americans fought well but were forced to retreat, seeking safety across the Croton River, farther north in Westchester. Over the next days, Howe pursued Washington, but the weather turned cold with heavy rain. On the morning of 5 November, Washington learned that Howe was breaking camp and heading south. At first, Washington was relieved, but only for a short time, when it dawned on him that Howe had one more prize in mind before winter weather brought down the curtain on the fighting season. Howe, Washington realised, was preparing to bring the full might of his army on the 2,600 isolated men at the fort bearing his name, back at Harlem Heights.

On 16 November the British launched an overwhelming, three-pronged attack on the fort. One column moved up from the south; one moved down from the north, and a third made an amphibious landing from Harlem Creek and attacked from the east. Washington, who had completed his army's movement from Westchester across the Hudson, was in Ft Constitution and watched the attack on Ft Washington through a spyglass. His heart sank when the great redoubt – thought capable of holding out for days – surrendered in less than five hours. It was a calamity of the highest order – 2,600 men and irreplaceable cannon, small arms, ammunition and other precious supplies were lost – after which there was plenty of finger-pointing with many in Congress losing faith in Washington. The capture of Ft Washington remained one of the greatest American disasters of the entire war.

As bleak as the situation was for Washington in mid-November, it was to get still worse. His army was shrinking from battlefield losses, camp diseases, expiration of enlistments and desertions. He knew he had to keep the army intact to keep the revolution alive. His army was encamped at Ft Constitution on

the New Jersey side of the Hudson when he received alarming news: a large British column, under the very able General Charles Cornwallis, had crossed the Hudson just to his north and was bearing down on them. Cornwallis was an energetic commander and a brilliant tactician. Indeed, it was his idea to execute this surprise night crossing of the broad Hudson amidst a heavy rain and capture Ft Constitution, with Washington in it.

The warning got to the Americans just in time. Leaving their breakfasts on the fire, they began a headlong retreat westward, praying to get to the other side of New Jersey (60 miles/96 km), and put the Delaware River between themselves and the pursuing British. After the defeats sustained between July and November, the retreat from Ft Constitution was humiliating for General Washington. He and his army were on the brink of disaster!

Washington stayed just out of Howe's grasp and reached the Delaware River above Trenton on 2 December. He sent scouts up and down the river to gather boats of every kind to ferry his army to the safety of the Pennsylvania shore and deny the British these crafts. Washington completed the westward crossing of the Delaware, on 8 December, just as the vanguard of the British arrived on the eastern side of the river.

Generally pre-modern armies did not fight in winter. As roads became impassable from snow and mud and horses had no grass to eat they went into winter quarters. Washington encamped around Newtown, on the Pennsylvania side of the river, screened by a set of hills between him and the Delaware. It was approaching Christmas, but there was no celebrating. Their situation was too dire. The army had dwindled to less than 4,500 freezing, underfed, poorly sheltered men, and many of their enlistments were to expire at the end of the year – in just a few days. Of those remaining, over half were militia or untested recruits. The army was short of clothing, many were clad in only rags, and morale had plummeted to new lows. To make matters worse, American citizenry was were losing faith in the cause of independence. Congress remained so fearful of a British attack that they abandoned Philadelphia and reconvened 100 miles/161 km to the south in Baltimore, Maryland.

On the New Jersey side of the Delaware, Howe made traditional winter plans. He stationed several Hessian regiments at the end of the line, in two hamlets along the Delaware: Bordentown and Trenton. Several British regiments were posted in Princeton, New

Brunswick and other New Jersey villages in a string back to New York. Howe and Cornwallis considered the fighting season over and returned to New York to enjoy the pleasures of winter in the city. The campaign of 1776 had been a great success for them, and they declared it over.

On the Pennsylvania side, on the morning of 24 December, Washington called his senior officers for a Council of War in his headquarters at the Thompson-Neely House. He reviewed their options. One was to sit out the winter here on the Delaware, but by spring the army would likely have dissolved, he warned. The second was to retreat into western Pennsylvania, Maryland or Virginia. Though this manoeuvre might keep the army intact, from these remote locations, the army would serve no purpose against the enemy. Washington concluded that both these choices spelled defeat. Even with their backs to the wall, Washington argued for an attack! He meticulously laid out the plan he had been working on, based on detailed intelligence about enemy strength and disposition on the New Jersey side of the river. The American army would attack at the end of their line with the objective of taking Trenton. There, eight miles to the south, was a garrison of 1,400 Hessians, with no other British or Hessian troops posted close enough to support them. Washington declared his men would have the advantage of total surprise by attacking the morning after Christmas, when the German units would be groggy from heavy celebrating and drinking.

On Christmas night, his main army of 2,400 men marched from Newtown and started to cross the Delaware at McConkey's Ferry (Fig. 6, upper left). Washington ordered another unit of 2,000 men to cross that same night farther south to tie up the Hessian corps in Bordentown. A further band of about 700 was ordered to cross at midnight, just opposite Trenton, seize the Bordentown Road to prevent any Hessian retreat from Trenton. Washington was frequently given to overly complex plans, and this one was exceedingly so, since the three units had no easy means of communicating. Nevertheless, there was excitement and heightened morale. Washington encountered adverse conditions. There were ice flows, cold winds, strong currents and sleet mixed with snow, which delayed the large Durham boats used in the crossing. He worried that his element of surprise would be lost. His main column did not get fully to New Jersey until 3 o'clock in the morning. It was just four hours before first light, the appointed hour for the attack, and there was still an eight-mile march ahead.

Unknown to Washington, the generals ordered to cross down river – across from Bordentown and Trenton – sized up the conditions on that terrible night and assumed the attack must be off. They did not cross. Washington's force marched on to Trenton alone.

After the crossing, the two bands that did cross were divided into two columns. The right was commanded by General John Sullivan, who had been captured in August at Long Island but had since been exchanged. This column was to march along the River Road and if all went according to plan was to enter lower Trenton. The other column was commanded by Washington's favourite and most steadfast general, Nathaneal Greene, a Rhode Islander of Quaker origin. His column was to march along the Pennington Road and attack Trenton from the north or upper side. Washington decided to ride with Greene's column. If all went well, the two columns, marching a mile apart through the night were to converge on Trenton and attack simultaneously from both ends of the town, as close to dawn as possible. The complexity of the plan and the inclement weather made the chances of success dim, but there could be no turning back!

Just after 8 o'clock, Greene's column marching along the Pennington Road engaged a small Hessian outpost, just outside Trenton. These Hessian pickets were quickly forced back, but sounded the alarm of the imminent American attack. At a commanding position in upper Trenton, Greene's men set up cannon and began a raking fire on the town. Fortune was with the Americans as Sullivan's men, who were approaching Trenton along the River Road, heard the cannon fire off to their left and hurried their pace. Incredibly, the two American columns began their attacks on opposite sides of Trenton within minutes of each other.

Before the Hessians could form, the Americans, with musket fire and bayonets, were upon them. It was all over in less than an hour. The Hessians surrendered in an orchard in lower Trenton. Their commander Colonel Rall was killed with over 1,000 of his force killed, wounded or captured. Only 200 Hessians escaped to the other German post in Bordentown. When Washington accepted the surrender, it was a sweet reprieve, a brilliant, though small victory following defeat after defeat and retreat after retreat.

Washington had no time for gloating. He had to deal with his tactical situation. He still did not know what happened to his units that had failed to cross. With only half the men he expected, and 1,000 prisoners, and knowledge that the Hessian and British regiments would soon be in motion against him,

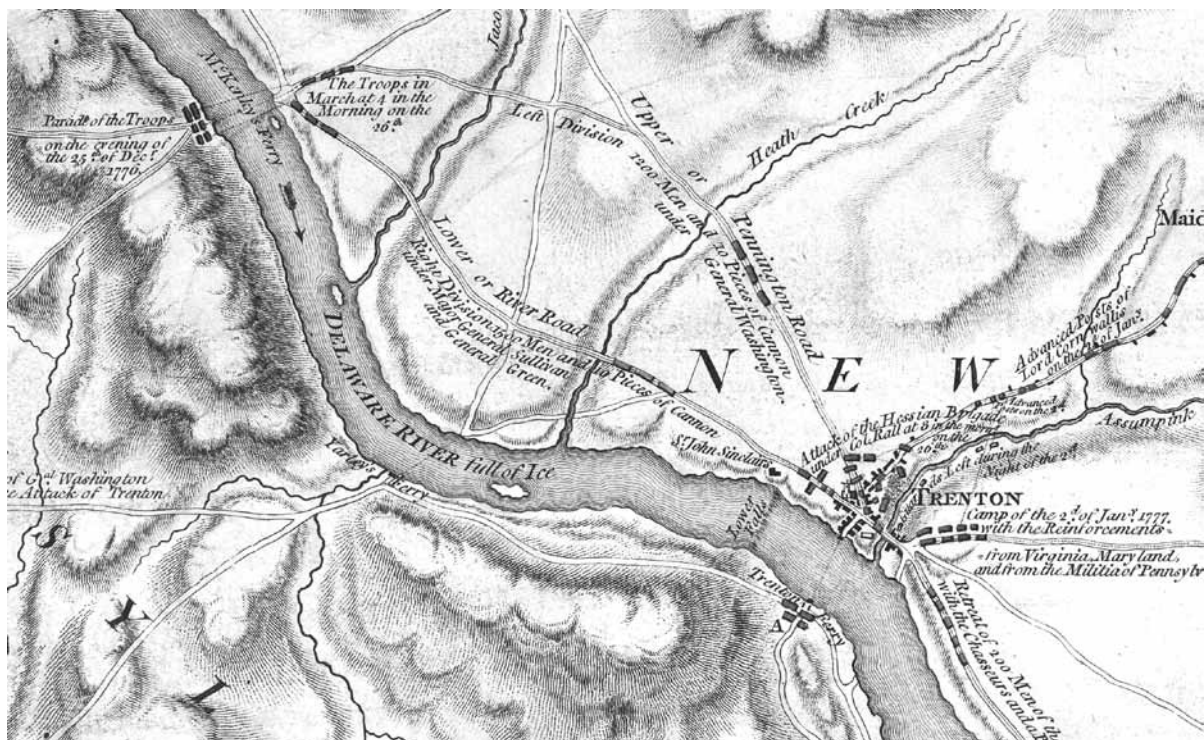


Fig. 6 Detail from: William Faden, 'Plan of the Operations of General Washington against the Kings Troops in New Jersey from the 26th of December 1776 to the 3d January 1777', 1777. With his back to the wall, General Washington decided to attack a Hessian outpost at Trenton, New Jersey on the day after Christmas, 1776. His small but brilliant victory here and a succeeding victory over British regulars in nearby Princeton the next week brought new life to the American cause of independence.

Washington took the only rational course. He marched his army back to McConkey's Ferry and re-crossed the Delaware to the safety of Pennsylvania.

The next day, an express rider brought Washington incredulous news. The 2,000 men, previously unaccounted for, had crossed the Delaware – over 24 hours late – and were now in Trenton. They reported no signs of the enemy. Not wanting to miss an opportunity, Washington decided to cross the Delaware once more, to consolidate his forces in Trenton and to attack the enemy in Princeton and regain control of West Jersey. The American army crossed back into New Jersey early on 29 and 30 December, but because of ice in the river, all the supplies and artillery did not make it to the New Jersey side until the 30th. Later that day, when the American army reached Trenton, Washington sent out scouting units while he fortified a defensive position with the Delaware on his left and Assunpink Creek on his front (Fig. 6, lower right). All was quiet on New Year's Day 1777, but the next afternoon, American scouting units engaged and delayed a large British force, under Lord Cornwallis, approaching from Princeton. Washington

had not counted on a winter British offensive, but Cornwallis was hopping mad and seeking revenge. By nightfall, Lord Cornwallis fronted the British on the opposite side of Assunpink Creek planning to capture the Americans in the morning.

Once more, Washington was in a predicament, outnumbered in front and hemmed in by the river on his left. The Americans were masters of putting up strong defences overnight, but this time the ground was frozen. Ever resourceful, Washington once again demonstrated his tactical skills. With intelligence from local militia, he learned of a road which led due east and then intersected another road running directly north to Princeton. On the night of 2 January, Washington executed a complex and dangerous manoeuvre, disengaging from Cornwallis' force on his front and marching around the British left. Had the British learned of Washington's withdrawal that night and attacked him in his flank, it would have been a disaster, but Washington took that risk and completed the move without Cornwallis getting the slightest hint of it.

The next morning, 3 January when Cornwallis

began his attack on the American positions, he was once again astonished to find that the American fox had escaped his grasp. Washington's force was already **8 miles/13 km** to the northwest and collided with three British regiments marching from Princeton toward Trenton. In a hot engagement, the Americans forced them to retreat. Washington and his men entered Princeton, but quickly learned that Cornwallis was now in pursuit from Trenton. With his men exhausted, Washington wisely decided he could do no more. He moved to winter quarters in the village of Morristown, New Jersey where the hills would protect the army and where his men would find shelter. Not able to follow Washington into these hills, Cornwallis returned his whole force to New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Here the campaign ended, but news of the brilliant victories at Trenton and Princeton breathed new life into the cause of independence. Washington, at last, received credit as a superior strategist and leader and as a successful battlefield commander. No matter what adversity Washington faced, he responded with bravery, an iron will, and determination. He inspired his men and rallied them time after time. The future of the United States hung by a mere thread during five critical months in late 1776 and very early 1777. And, indeed, the destiny of the Union in those months rested heavily on the shoulders of one man, General George Washington.

Barnet Schecter, *George Washington's America, A Biography Through His Maps*, Walker & Company, 2010, p. 26–28, 69–93, 122–149.

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Notes

- 1 See <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/creating-the-united-states>. Exhibit from 12 April 2008–5 May 2012. Accessed 19 July 2016.
- 2 Quote by John Adams in his diary, dated 23 August 1774. Cited in Michael Pollak, 'Were New Yorkers Always Seen as Fast Talking and Rude?' *New York Times*, 28 October 2011. www.nytimes.com/.../were-new-yorkers-always-seen-as-fast-talkers. Accessed 24 July 24 2016.
- 3 Cited in Barnet Schecter, *The Battle for New York*, Walker & Co. 2002, p. 99.
- 4 Cited in David McCullough, *1776*, Simon & Schuster, 2005, p. 212.

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