

A History: The Battle of Trenton

Every American schoolchild is familiar with the painting showing George Washington standing resolutely in a small boat carrying a loyal band of revolutionary troops across the icy Delaware River from Pennsylvania to New Jersey in December, 1776. One of the soldiers is carrying a flag showing the Revolutionary Stars and Stripes. (Actually, the Revolutionary flag was probably not introduced until 1777 and may not have been made by Betsy Ross, although Betsy was a flag maker who sold many of her flags to the Continental Congress.) Historians have recorded that the soldier carrying the flag in the painting was Lieutenant James Monroe, our fifth President. James Madison, John Marshall, Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr were also among the troops who crossed the Delaware with Washington.

By December 1776, Washington had been forced to retreat from New York, through New Jersey and into Pennsylvania. His troops consisted of about 2,400 men. Across the River from him, in the City of Trenton, sat three regiments of Hessian troops commanded by Colonel Johann Rall. On Christmas Eve, Washington gathered his troops to begin the crossing of the Delaware and the rout of the Hessians. At 11 PM, an intense winter storm began to fall. It took Washington's troops four hours to cross the River. Relying on the storm to keep Washington away, the Hessians had not posted their usual patrols, and Washington's attack was a complete surprise. The Hessians suffered many casualties and were completely routed; Colonel Rall himself was killed. The Battle of Trenton had been fought and won. It proved that Continental volunteers could defeat a regular Army and was a major turning point in the Revolutionary War. A few days later, Washington led his troops in the decisive Battle of Princeton, and the British were driven from most of New Jersey.