

1776-77
CROSSING
THE
DELAWARE



THE CHARACTERS

NARRATORS 1-2

GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON: *Leader of the Continental Army*

MARTHA WASHINGTON: *George Washington's wife*

Letter Writers:

PRIVATE JOHN WILLIS: *Soldier in the Virginia Militia*

LIEUTENANT GEORGE SHAW: *Officer in the Massachusetts Militia*

GENERAL CHARLES CORNWALLIS: *Officer in British army*

COLONEL ABNER GLOVER: *Officer in the Massachusetts Militia*

CALEB ROSS: *Soldier with Vermont Volunteers*

JOHN BEACHAM: *Soldier with Georgia Volunteers*

SIMON BLACK: *Soldier with Connecticut Militia*

AMERICAN SOLDIERS 1-5

AMERICAN SOLDIERS 1-10 (*nonspeaking roles*)

THE PLACE

The American Continental Army camp near the Delaware River

THE TIME

December 1776

NARRATOR 1: It's a bitterly cold winter in Pennsylvania and New Jersey along the Delaware River. On the New Jersey side of the river are 3,000 Hessian soldiers—German mercenaries hired by King George III to fight against the Americans.

NARRATOR 2: General Charles Cornwallis sent a report to the British Parliament, assuring them that the Continental Army would soon go down in defeat.

CORNWALLIS:

Report to Parliament.

Dear Sirs,

I have pursued the rebel army out of New York across the Hudson River, down the length of New Jersey, and across the Delaware River. In their flight, the Americans have burned every bridge after crossing it, felled trees in our path, and done everything to delay our pursuit.

They have temporarily evaded complete defeat at my hands by crossing the Delaware, having burned all boats remaining to me on the New Jersey side. But this measure will not save them from the snows of December. They are without shelter or warm clothing, and they have little food or ammunition. Come spring, I will sweep aside what remains of their force.

In short, gentlemen, their cause is lost.

Your Obedient Servant,
General Charles Cornwallis

NARRATOR 1: The American Continental Army camps on the Pennsylvania side of the river. The army, under General George Washington, has not won a single battle. They've been forced to retreat in the face of British advances.

NARRATOR 2: In the American camp, soldiers huddle over campfires, repair uniforms and what's left of their shoes, play cards and other games. They clean and oil their muskets. Some eat dry bread. Many,

like Private John Willis of the Virginia Militia, write letters to their loved ones at home.

JOHN WILLIS:

My Dearest Wife,

With Christmas coming on, I miss you and the little one more than I can bear. I hope the season is treating you better than it's treating us. My last pair of shoes has fallen hopelessly to pieces, but they lasted longer than most of my comrades' shoes. Now I am wearing rags tied about my feet, and I, too, leave bloody tracks in the snow along the Delaware River.

All my love,
Johnny

GEORGE SHAW:

Dear Family,

I fear our cause is lost. We no longer even resemble a fighting army. We are a ragged band of sick and freezing men. The volunteers are deserting daily. I hate them for it, but at the same time, I understand. They have farms and families to tend, but so do I. I have no idea when or if this letter will reach you. If I should never see you again, please know how much I love you.

Your loving son and brother,
George

NARRATOR 1: General George Washington made his report to the Continental Congress.

WASHINGTON:

Honorable Members of the Continental Congress.

Dear Sirs,

I cannot make war on our enemies without the means and materials necessary to do so. My force is spread thinly along 25 miles of the west bank of the Delaware River. They are without food, clothing, arms, and ammunition. You must supply me with these and do so quickly or, I'm sad to report, the grand ideas for which we fight will perish with us.

Yours,
General George Washington

COL. GLOVER:

My Dear Friend,

It snowed again last night. We stagger around camp like dying men. Our cause is just, but our capabilities are few. If the British—we can see their fires across the river—find boats in which to cross, we would be barely able to put up a fight. If I were the British commander, I would not attack. Why waste men when you can let the winter defeat us?

We still have all faith in General Washington, who strides about the camp like a Roman warrior doing what he can to keep up our morale, but even he cannot defeat the weather. We must do something, but I do not know what. Time presses because in the new year, the enlistments of half our army will expire, and they will leave for their homes. With them will go the last of our hopes for success.

Yours, hopefully,

Ab

NARRATOR 2: Like his soldiers, George Washington had his doubts and fears. Unlike them, he had his wife Martha with him. She stayed at the old stone house, which was Washington's headquarters at Valley Forge. Almost every day, Mrs. Washington walked among the soldiers, talking with them, passing out socks she'd knitted, mending their clothes, caring for the sick and wounded, and passing out what food she could find.

WASHINGTON: We've been retreating for six months, and if we do nothing but camp here until spring, I fear all will be lost. I must act, but how? No man, I believe, ever had greater difficulties, and less means to extricate himself from them.

MARTHA WASHINGTON: We knew it would be no easy task, taking on England. They have more resources than we do. We, however, have more to lose than they do. Our men will fight harder. They're fighting for their homes and their families.

WASHINGTON: I have in mind the beginnings of a plan. It's desperate, but so is our condition.

MARTHA WASHINGTON: Then you must act, even if acting will destroy us all and the justice of our cause.

WASHINGTON: We'll attack at dawn on the morning of December 26. The Hessians will have celebrated Christmas and, I trust, will not be rising early and on their guard. My plan hinges upon complete surprise. Without it, we cannot succeed, for I haven't the weapons or the men to risk a frontal attack.

GLOVER:

Dear Friend,

General Washington means to attack! The man has conceived a brilliant plan. He recognizes that if we remain here, the winter will defeat us. We've learned from spies that 3,000 Hessians have been stationed in Trenton across the river. This is the force that will attack us in the spring, but we're going to attack them first. I cannot send this letter, of course, for fear it would fall into enemy hands, but I am excited by the plan and couldn't sleep.

Ab

CALEB ROSS:

My Dear Sister,

The weather was dreadful on Christmas night. Sleet, snow, and wind plagued our crossing. How we struggled, how it hurt, to load our few cannons into our three tiny boats. And how we feared that river in them. The wind caused waves as on an ocean and drove ice floes into us, and capsizes seemed inescapable. We knew we'd live but minutes in that freezing water.

Your brother,

Caleb

WASHINGTON: I have divided my meager force into three elements, with which I hope to surround Trenton. We will land at a point six miles north of the town, which requires my men to march in the dark over frozen roads before we can take up positions for attack. The men are outnumbered and outgunned. We have but four cannons, while our enemy has ten times that. No general in living memory has asked more from an army without shoes.

JOHN BEACHAM:

Dear Family,

We fought cold, wind, and dreadful flocs of ice, and though more than once I thought us dead, we made it across the Delaware River. However, as our little army regrouped on the bank, we discovered that many boats did not make it across the river. Did the others turn back or did they drown? We knew not. Would General Washington cancel his plans? No! He ordered us on. And we were glad. To a man we'd rather face a greater enemy than recross that terrible frozen water.

Yours truly,

John B.

SIMON BLACK:

Dear Brother,

Only General Washington's force of 2,500 made it across the river, and I was among them. He walked among us. At over six feet tall, he towered over us like Colossus. Speaking in a near whisper, he reminded us why we fight, and what gallant souls we are to stand for liberty. I want to stand for liberty, but that night I hoped not to have to fall for liberty. It seemed likely that I would have to do just that.

Wish me well,

Simon

SOLDIER 1: By dawn, we were in position for attack. It began when we stumbled upon their sentries. Shouting and flashing our bayonets, we drove them from their posts, and we spilled into the streets of Trenton.

SOLDIER 2: Our cannon fired over our heads into the streets of Trenton. We could hear the shot ripping the air.

SOLDIER 3: We let off blood-curdling screams, muskets firing, sabers rattling. I'll tell you, my friend, we were proper terrors this Christmas Day, and I'm glad I was not on the receiving end of our wrath.

SOLDIER 4: It seemed as if the battle had raged for hours, but at the end of it, I was surprised to find that not even one hour had passed.

SOLDIER 5: I'll never forget this day for as long as I live.

NARRATOR 1: General Washington made his report to the Continental Congress.

WASHINGTON:

Honorable Members of the Continental Congress.

Dear Sirs,

It is my honor to report that we have taken Trenton, New Jersey. We attacked before dawn this Christmas Day, and took the Hessian force under Colonel Rall completely by surprise. We cut off their line of retreat, and when General Knox's artillery fired briskly down the two main streets, the Hessian officers quickly surrendered.

Without the brilliant boat handling, under very trying conditions, by Colonel Glover's Marblehead regiment, the battle could not have been engaged, let alone won.

It is my pleasure to report that in capturing 900 prisoners, 1,200 small arms, and six cannons, we lost not a single man in battle, though two brave souls froze to death en route.

Gentlemen, I beseech you, make the most of this victory and recruit
MORE MEN.

Yours,

General George Washington

NARRATOR 2: General Cornwallis, who had wintered in New York City, had some explaining of his own to do.

CORNWALLIS:

Report to Parliament.

Dear Sirs,

General George Washington has taken Trenton in a diabolical sneak attack on Christmas Day. A gentleman does not wage war in winter, let alone Christmas. The General is no gentleman. He, of course, does not have the forces to hold Trenton, and when spring, the proper season for war, comes around, we will sweep him out of Trenton. However, we must recognize that this General Washington could prove a serious problem should his force grow in number.

Your Obedient Servant,

General Charles Cornwallis

JOHN WILLIS:

My Dearest Wife,

Well, it's been quite the day. Not only am I alive, but I'm a genuine *hero*. George Washington himself said so. However, I don't know when I'll be coming home.

Soon, I hope—

John

NARRATOR 1: Many soldiers were due to leave the Continental Army on January 1 when their tours of duty were over. Each soldier was offered \$10 if he would stay; almost all of them refused.

NARRATOR 2: They were tired and cold and hungry. They had promised their families they would return soon.

NARRATOR 1: Then Washington ordered the troops to parade in formation. He asked the soldiers to stay one more month. He said that he knew they had given everything they had to give—

NARRATOR 2: But they had to give a little more for liberty, and for their country. Everything depended on it.

NARRATOR 1: When it was time to ask for reenlistment, almost every soldier signed up. The war wouldn't end for another five years. There would be many more battles—won and lost—between now and then.



B A C K G R O U N D
O N
CROSSING THE DELAWARE



IN 1776, THE BRITISH hoped to capture the important port of New York City and then use their forces to divide Massachusetts from the states to the south. Once the new nation was divided, they felt, it would surrender.

When the British general William Howe sailed to New York in June of 1776, George Washington and about 18,000 American troops were waiting for him on Long Island. Howe waited to attack until August when his 32,000 troops finally arrived. Outnumbered, the Americans had to retreat. Instead of pressing his advantage and capturing the Americans, Howe ordered his troops to rest for a day. Protected by fog, Washington and his troops were able to move north to forts that would later be named Fort Lee and Fort Washington. Washington and Howe clashed again in White Plains, New York, in October. Howe again overpowered the American forces and took both forts.

The British general Charles Cornwallis followed Washington as he retreated. The Americans burned bridges behind them as they moved south through New Jersey, and chopped down trees to block roads. In December, the Americans reached the Delaware River. They commandeered boats to take them across the river and burned any others they could find. Washington and his troops arrived safely in Pennsylvania; the British, without boats, had to camp on the New Jersey side of the river. Believing that the colonists were defeated, Cornwallis scattered his troops along the river and then sailed for England.

On the morning of December 26, 1776, when the 3,000 Hessian troops in Trenton, New Jersey, were still sleeping, Washington attacked. In less than an hour, the Americans captured Trenton.

R E V O L U T I O N A R Y R E A D I N G

The Winter of Red Snow by Kristiana Gregory (Scholastic, 1996)

Crossing the Delaware: A History in Many Voices by Louise Peacock
(Atheneum, 1998)

Daughter of Liberty: A True Story of the American Revolution by Robert
M. Quackenbush (Hyperion, 1999)



A C T I V I T I E S

Retreat or Stand Your Ground?

Washington retreated several times from the British army. If he hadn't, the American forces would certainly have been captured, and England would have won the war. Ask students how they feel about retreating from a confrontation. Do they consider it to be a cowardly act or a brave one? How can they put the strategy of retreating to good use in their own lives?

The United States of . . . England?

General Cornwallis was so sure that England was about to win the war that he sailed home. He was almost right. But then George Washington seized the initiative. Pose the following questions to students: *What if England had won the Revolutionary War? How do you think your lives might be different today?*

He's a Card!

Bring out the artist and the historian in your students. Have them make up a set of Revolutionary trading cards featuring people, American and British, who were important to the American Revolution. Distribute poster board, tag board, or blank index cards to students. Make sure everyone has colored pencils, markers, or paints. Ask each student to contribute at least four cards to make up a class set of cards. On the front of each card, they should draw

a picture of the person, and on the back, they should briefly explain his or her contribution. Allow time for students to look at one another's cards.

Recording History

Today we can read diaries of people who lived during the American Revolution. Ask students if they think those people realized their words would still be read more than 200 years later. Did they realize they were recording history? Suggest that students start their own diaries, recording the history of their own lives and times. Which events in the community, state, nation, and world have an impact and an effect on them? Periodically, allow students to share their diaries with the rest of the class.

Fact or Fiction?

Fact or fiction—did George Washington toss a coin across the Delaware River? Challenge students to create a game called Fact or Fiction?, based on people and events of the American Revolution. Ask everyone to contribute at least five fact or fiction game cards, with answers and facts to back them up. Let students play the game in pairs, in groups, or as a class. You can be the moderator and read the cards. Students score a point for each correct answer.

The Best-Laid Plans

Washington planned a three-prong attack on the Hessians in Trenton. Unfortunately, only one third of the troops was able to make it across the Delaware River. Washington then had to divide those forces into two groups. Let groups of students draw maps of the planned attack or the actual attack on Trenton. Have groups compare the plans with what actually happened. Students may also want to draw story maps of Washington's retreat from New York City to the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware River.