



The painting by Emanuel Leutze of General George Washington leading his force of Continental soldiers across the Delaware River is one of the Revolutionary War's most familiar images. The event was bedrock for the surprise attack on Hessian troops encamped at Trenton, New Jersey, generating America's first major victory of the war. The miracle river crossing occurred on Christmas night in 1776. The boats commandeered for the task were normally used to transport materials, not people. They were flat-bottomed, high-sided vessels pointed at both ends, 40-60 feet long with a beam of eight feet. Each boat could accommodate up to 40 men standing. [The most challenging logistics of the mission, accomplished under the leadership of Colonel Henry Knox, was transporting 18 field cannon and 50 horses in the boats.](#) The following morning, swirling snow and gunpowder smoke mixed as Washington's army completely overwhelmed the enemy. [In fact, the Hessian force was so taken by surprise that in less than an hour of furious battle some 900 Hessians—practically two-thirds of the total regiment—became either battlefield casualty or prisoner of war.](#) This despite the fact that Washington's approach was detected by Loyalist operatives. According to one version of the story, Hessian commander Colonel Johann Rall was too busy drinking and playing cards with some of his subordinate officers in the fireplace-warmed comfort of a local Loyalist's house to bother reading a note handed to him by a messenger warning of the approaching enemy column. It was in colonel's breast pocket, unread still when he was shot from his horse during retreat. In addition to the heavy surrender, the Hessian force suffered over 100 casualties (Rall's wounds were mortal). The American losses were incredibly miniscule—only four wounded (including Lieutenant and future President James Monroe). Within days, news spread with accounts of Washington's bold crossing of the Delaware, the brutal night march, and the subsequent battle victory. From the British perspective, the Trenton "skirmish" was "unlucky" and a "cursed" affair resulting in a "disagreeable" outcome. Americans, on the other hand, described Trenton as "extraordinary," "success beyond expectation," and a "glorious day for our country." In the words of historian David McCullough, ". . . 1776 . . . was [for the Continental Army] . . . a year of all-too-few victories, sustained suffering, disease, hunger, desertion, cowardice, defeat, disillusionment, terrible discouragement, and fear" erased by Washington's tremendous victory at Trenton.