



## TallShipTuesdays

### Historical Context

After the patriots celebrated the passage of the Declaration of Independence in July 1776, the Continental army met with serious military defeats. General Washington's twenty thousand poorly trained and ill-equipped men faced more than forty-five thousand professional British troops commanded by General William Howe in the New York City area.

Howe defeated the Americans at Brooklyn Heights, sending Washington's troops into a panic and inflicting heavy casualties. Had bad weather not interfered with the orders given to Admiral Richard Howe (General Howe's brother) to sail up the East River and cut off an American retreat, Washington's entire army might have been captured. Instead, Washington escaped across the East River with ninety-five hundred men during the night of August 29.

General Howe delayed pursuing Washington's army. With authority from George III, he proposed an informal peace conference. Congress assigned Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Edmund Rutledge to meet with Admiral Howe. The conference took place on Staten Island on September 11. Any hope of negotiation ended abruptly when Howe insisted at the outset that the Declaration of Independence be revoked.

Still in New York state, Washington continued to withdraw, building fortifications on Harlem Heights. There he almost lost a large part of his army when he was outflanked by the British. He was then forced to withdraw to White Plains. On October 28, the Continentals were defeated again.

During this period, Washington's primary objective was to hold his small army together. His troops continued their retreat through New Jersey. On December 7 and 8, they crossed the Delaware River into Pennsylvania, where the British ended their chase.

Howe and his army returned to New York City for the winter. He believed that he had destroyed the patriots' spirit and will to fight. Planning to put a quick end to the revolt in the spring, he ordered his **Hessian** troops into winter quarters in New Jersey. One town, Trenton, was defended by some fourteen hundred Hessian soldier under Colonel Johann Rahl.

Washington made plans to cross the Delaware River with twenty-four hundred men on Christmas Day, 1776 and launch an attack on Trenton. The night before the army moved, he ordered that a copy of Thomas Paine's pamphlet *The American Crisis, No. 1*, be read aloud at every campfire. Paine had written his stirring words while retreating with Washington's army across New Jersey. The pamphlet begins, "These are the times that try men's souls."

Desperate for success, Washington sent his men into battle with the password “victory or Death.” Meanwhile, Colonel Rahl and his men began sleeping off their Christmas celebration. But in the Pennsylvania and New Jersey countryside, not everyone was asleep.

### Vocabulary

- **Hessians:** German soldiers who were hired by the British to fight for them. Most of the **Hessian** victories came during the early fighting in New York State, but throughout the conflict they were generally feared by the Americans. The Hessian presence made Loyalists feel uneasy because they had expected to be entirely protected by British troops. During the war, the Continental Congress printed propaganda pamphlets written in German that encouraged the Hessians to desert the British. When the war ended, nearly five thousand Hessians settled in the new nation.

**Resource** – the historical context comes from the short story “Across the Delaware” by Marcella Anderson in the book, *Young Patriots: Inspiring Stories of the American Revolution*, by Marcella Anderson & Elizabeth Vollstadt. The story is read by Capt. Jones in the #TallShipTuesdays video, “Crossing the Delaware.”

### #TallShipTuesdays