

## Henry Knox's Orders of March to Trenton, 1776

### Introduction

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On Christmas Day in 1776 the American Revolution was on the verge of collapsing. Since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the American forces had been driven from New York City to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, and reduced to a mere three thousand men.

Washington knew that a victory was needed to raise the Americans' morale and turn the tide of war. With winter on its way and thousands of enlistments soon expiring, his time was running out. Washington, seeing an opportunity, decided to attack Trenton, New Jersey, a nearby town guarded by only fifteen hundred Hessians, German mercenaries fighting for the British.

Washington's officers received orders detailing the plan to cross the Delaware River late on Christmas Day and "arrive at Trenton at five o'clock" to surprise the enemy forces. This copy of Washington's orders, with a map of Trenton drawn on the back, belonged to Henry Knox, chief artillery officer, and was written in his own hand. Also presented here is Knox's firsthand account of the battle, in a letter written to his wife Lucy on December 28.

Knox played an important role in the monumental river crossing and historic battle. As Knox wrote his wife "the night was cold & stormy It haild with great violence," and ice floes and a brutal winter storm made the Delaware River almost impassable on December 25. Washington had ordered the dangerous and difficult task of crossing the river in treacherous winter conditions to be placed "under the direction of Colonel Knox." Knox never left Washington's side, shouting out the general's orders until every last man was safely across.

Although foul weather kept the Americans from reaching Trenton until eight in the morning, it also concealed their approach and afforded them the essential element of surprise. Knox wrote that "the Troops march'd with the most profound silence and good order." The battle proceeded almost exactly as drawn up Washington's orders. Washington's army, split in two, surprised the Hessians, trapped them in the town, and overpowered the enemy force. Knox wrote that the surprise was so successful that "The hurry fright & confusion of the enemy was unlike that which shall be when the last Trump shall sound."

Knox's artillery played a decisive role, inflicting heavy damage inside the close quarters of the town. The Continentals killed or captured nearly one thousand Hessian troops during their victory at Trenton. Knox modestly wrote his wife, "The General has done me the unmerited great honor of thanking me in public orders in terms strong & polite," noting "I should blush to mention to any other than to you my dear Lucy." Indeed, Washington did recognize Knox's service; two days later Knox was promoted to Brigadier General of Artillery.

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Despite the victory at Trenton, the Americans began 1777 at a great disadvantage and Continental defeats would continue to outnumber victories. Tactically, the battle cost the British a small but noticeable part of their fighting force and deprived them of control of southern New Jersey. More importantly, the victory restored hope in the Revolution just when it was dangerously low; soldiers began reenlisting, recruitment grew, and support on the home front increased significantly. The American forces began building the momentum that eventually enabled them to win the Revolution. When Knox wrote these orders, shortly before the dramatic river crossing, the American Revolution appeared to be on its dying breath. But by the time the orders had been successfully carried out, the patriots' cause was given new life.

### Excerpt

Letter from Henry Knox to Lucy Knox, December 28, 1776

It haild with great violence the Troops march'd with the most profound silence and good order. they arrivd by two routs on roads at the same time about half an hour after day light. *[inserted: to within one mile of the Town]* the storm continued with great violence but was in our backs & consequently in the faces of our Enemy – about half a mile from the Town was an advanced Guard on each road consisting of a Captains Guard – these Guards we forc'd & enter'd the Town with them pell-mell, & here succeeded a scene of war of which I had often Conceived but never saw before. The hurry fright & confusion of the enemy was unlike that which shall be when the last Trump shall sound – they endevord to form in streets the heads of which we had previously the possession of with Cannon & Howitzers, these in the twinkling of an eye cleard the streets, the backs of the the houses were resorted to for shelter, these prov'd ineffectual the musketry soon dislog'd them finally they were driven through the Town into an open plain beyond the Town – here they form'd in an instant – during the contest in the streets – measures were taken for putting an entire stop to their retreat by posting troops and Cannon in such passes and roads as it was possible for them to get away by – the poor fellows after they were form'd on the plains saw themselves Completely surrounded – the only resource left was to force their way thro numbers unknown to them – strongly posted with Cannon. The Hessians lost part of their Cannon in the Town they did not relish the project of forcing, & were oblig'd to Surrender upon the spot with all their artillery.

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### Questions for Discussion

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Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer these questions.

1. From your knowledge of American history, why was the Battle of Trenton an extremely important victory for General Washington's army?
2. The transcript of the letter reveals that Knox ordered that "profound silence" must be observed and that "no man to quit his ranks under pain of death." What does this reveal to you about the importance and strategy of the attack?
3. Knox also ordered that Trenton be surrounded and that people attempting to enter or leave the town should be captured and held. Why do you think he issued this order?
4. From what we know of the weather conditions, why was this victory by the Americans considered a near miracle?
5. Imagine that you are General Washington and you are preparing a short speech to deliver to your fellow officers and soldiers to acknowledge the accomplishments of Colonel Henry Knox. Include the specific reasons for which you are honoring Knox.
6. List and explain two military strategies that Colonel Knox suggested in his Order of March on Trenton that contributed to its success.
7. Why was the time and date of the attack upon the Hessian forces at Trenton crucial to the success of the colonists?

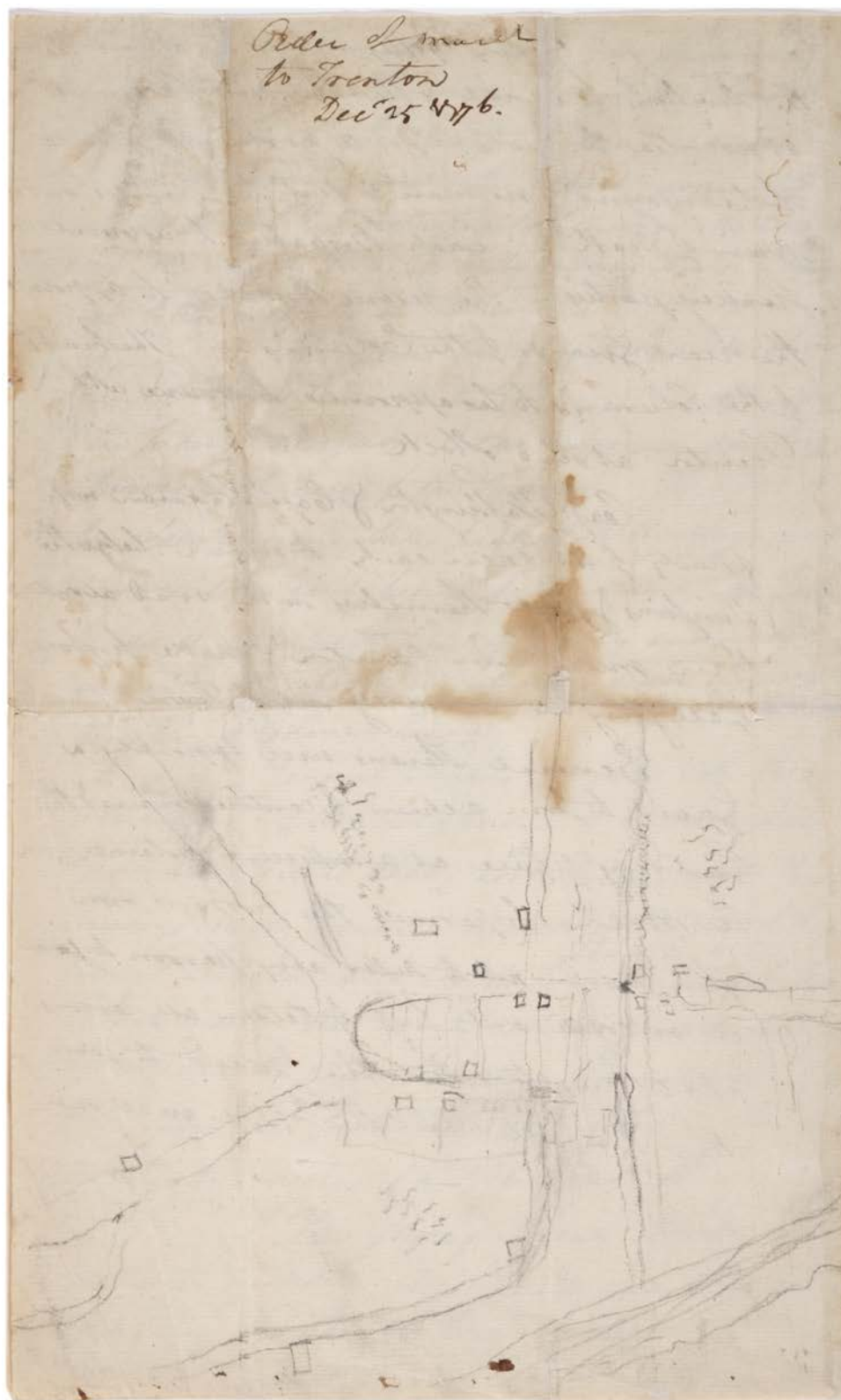
# Henry Knox's Orders of March to Trenton, 1776

## Image

KNOX Each Brigade <sup>order of march</sup> to be furnished with two good Guides. Dec 25 1776 <sup>III-93</sup> ✓ 224  
 General Stevens Brigade to form the advanced party & to have with them a detachment of the Artillery without Cannon provided with pikes and Hammies to pick up the enemies Cannon in case of necessity or to bring them off if it can be effected. This party to be provided with drag ropes for the purpose of dragging off the Cannon. General Stevens is to attack and force the enemies Guards and seize such posts as may prevent them from forming in the streets and in case they are annoyed from the houses to set them on fire. The Brigade of Mercer & Lord Stirling under the Command of Major General Greene to support General Stevens, this is the second division or left wing of the Army and to march by the way of the Pennington Road.  
 St. Clair's Glouster & Sargents Brigades ~~to march by the river road~~ under Major General Sullivan to march by the river road. This is the first division of the Army and to form the right wing. Lord Stirling's Brigade to form the reserve of the left wing and General St. Clair's Brigade the reserve

Henry Knox, Order of march to Trenton, December 26, 1776. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC02437.00495)

## Henry Knox's Orders of March to Trenton, 1776





## Henry Knox's Orders of March to Trenton, 1776

### Transcript

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[Order of march to Trenton] by Henry Knox, December 25, 1776 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC02437.00495)

Each Brigade to be furnish'd with two good Guides.

General Stevenss Brigade to form the advanced party & to have with them a detachment of the Artillery without Cannon provided with spikes and Hammers to spike up the enemies Cannon in case of necessity or to bring them off if it can be effected. the party to be provided with drag ropes for the purpose of dragging off the Cannon. General Stevens is to attack and force the enemies guards and seize such posts as may pressure them from forming in the streets and in case they are annoy'd from the houses to set them on fire. The Brigades of Mercer & Lord Stirling under the Command of Major General Greene to support General Stevens, this is the second division or left wing of the Army and to march by the way of the Pennington Road.

S<sup>t</sup> Clairs Glovers & Sargents Brigades [*struck*: to embark in order] under Major General Sullivan to march by the river road, this is the first division of the Army and to form the right wing. Lord Stirlings Brigade to form the reserve of the left wing and General S<sup>t</sup> Clairs Brigade the reserve [2] of the right wing. These reserves to form a second line in Conjunction or a second hand to each division as circumstances may require – Each Brigadier to make the Colonels acquainted with the posts of their respective Regiments in the Brigade and the Major Generals will inform them of the parts of their Brigades in the Line.

Four peices of artillery to march at the head of each Column, three peices at the head of the second Brigade of each Division and two peices with each of the Reserves. The troops to be assembled one Miles back of M<sup>c</sup>Konkeys ferry and as soon as it begins to grow dark the troops to be March'd to M<sup>c</sup>Konkeys ferry and embark onboard the boats in following order under the direction of Colonel Knox

General Stevens Brigade with the detachment of Artillery men to embark first General Mercers next; Lord Stirlings next, Gen<sup>l</sup> Fermoy's next who will march in the rear of the second Division and file off from the [*inserted*: Pennington to the] Princeton Road in such direction that he can with the greatest ease & safety secure the passes between Princeton & Trenton the Guides will be the best judges of this. he is to take two peices of artillery with him

S<sup>t</sup> Clair Glover & Sargents Brigades to embark in order. Immediately upon their

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debarkation the whole to form & march in Subdivisions from the Right

The [3] Commanding officers of Regiments to observe that the Divisions be equal & that proper officers be appointed to each – a profound silence to be enjoynd & no man to quit his Ranks on the pain of Death – each Brigadier to appoint flanking parties – the reserve Brigades to appoint the rear Guards of the Columns – The heads of the Columns to be appointed to arrive at Trenton at five oClock

Cap<sup>t</sup> Washington & Cap<sup>t</sup> [Flaharan] with a party of 40 men each to march before the Divisions & posts themselves on the road about three miles from Trenton & make prisoner of all going in or coming out of Town

General Stevens will appoint a Guard to form a chain of centries round the landing place at a sufficient distance from the river to permit the troops to form This Guard not to suffer any person to gone in or [*struck: come*] [*inserted: go*] out but to detain all persons who attempts either this Guard to join their Brigade when the troops are all over

[*docket*]

Order of march

to Trenton

Dec<sup>r</sup> 25 1776.





## Henry Knox's Orders of March to Trenton, 1776

### Transcript

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Henry Knox to Lucy Knox, December 28, 1776 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC02437.00497)

Delaware [*inserted: River*] near Trenton Dec<sup>r</sup> 28, 1776

past 12 °Clock

my dearly belov'd friend,

It greives me exceedingly that I still date my Letters from this place, & That I am so far distant from the dearest object of my affections. This War with all its variety is not able to banish your much lov'd Idea from my heart. Whatever I am employ'd about still you are with me – I often say to myself no my Lucy not so your Harry will return as soon as the sacred calls of his Country will permit – will return with the permission of heaven and enjoy all the blessings of [*struck: nuptial*] conjugal affection, – I wrote you a few days past by M<sup>r</sup> Shaw. it was short as my then [*hurry*] would not suffer me to [*to do otherwise*]

You will before this have heard of our success on the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> instant against the enemy – The enemy by their superior numbers had oblig'd us to retire on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware by which means we were oblig'd to evacuate or give up nearly all the Jersies, even after our retiring over the river the preservation of Philadelphia was a matter exceedingly precarious – The Force of the enemy three or four times as large [2] as ours. however the Enemy seem'd contented with their success for the present and quarterd their troops in different & distant places in the Jersies – of these cantoonments Trenton was the most Considerable – Trenton is an open Town situated nearly on the Banks of the Delaware accessible on all sides, [*struck: here Our [strikeout]*] our army was scatter'd along the river for nearly 25 miles. – our intelligence agreed that the force of the enemy in Trenton was from two to three Thousand with about six field Cannon and that they were pretty secure in their situation & that they were Hessians, no British troops – a hardy design was form'd of attacking the Town by storm accordingly a part of the army consisting of about [*inserted: 2500 or*] three thousand pass'd the River on Christmass night with allmost infinite difficulty, with eighteen feild peice, [*struck: The ice being in*] floating Ice in the River made the labour almost incredible however perseverance accomplished what at first seem'd impossible – about two OClock the troops were

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all on the Jersey side – we then were about nine miles from the object, the night was cold & stormy [*struck*: hailing] It haild with great violence the Troops march'd with the most profound silence and good order. they arrivd by two routs on roads at the same time about [*struck*: half hour] half an hour after [3] day light. [*inserted*: to within one mile of the Town] the storm continued with great violence but was in our backs & consequently in the faces of our Enemy – about half a mile [*struck*: below] from the Town was an advanced Guard on each road consisting of a Captains Guard – [*struck phrase*] these Guards we forc'd & enter'd the Town with them pell-mell, & here succeeded a [*struck*: sene] scene of war of which I had often Conceived but never saw before. The hurry fright & confusion of the enemy was unlike that which shall be when the last Trump shall sound – they endevord to form in streets the heads of which we had previously the possession of with Cannon & Howitzers, these in the twinkling of an eye cleared the streets, [*struck*: Then] the [*inserted*: backs of the] the houses were resorted to for shelter, these prov'd ineffectual the musketry soon dislog'd them [*struck*: from these] finally they were driven through the Town into an open plain beyond the [*struck*: Country] Town – here they form'd in an instant – during the contest in the [*struck*: Town] streets – measures were taken for putting an entire stop to their retreat by posting troops and Cannon in such passes and roads as it was possible for them to get [*inserted*: away] by – the poor fellows after they were form'd on the plains saw themselves Completely surrounded – the only resource left [*struck*: for them] was to force their way thro numbers unknown to them – strongly posted with Cannon. The Hessians lost [*struck*: their great] part of their Cannon in the Town [4] they did not relish the project of forcing, & were oblig'd to Surrender upon the spot with all their artillery [*inserted*: 6 brass peices] army Colors &c &c. – a Col<sup>o</sup> Rawle commanded who was wounded – the number of prisoners was above 1200. including officers [*inserted*: all [*struck*: officers] Hessians] there were but few kill'd or wounded on either side – the Hessians might have about 30 or 40 Kill'd & perhaps a hundred wounded, our kill'd and wounded did not amount to more than 30 – after having march'd off the prisoners & secur'd the Cannon stores &c we return'd to the place 9 miles distant where we had embarkd from – Providence seem'd to have smil'd upon every part of this enterprize; great advantages may be gaind from it if we [*struck*: make a] [*inserted*: take the] proper [*struck*: use of it] advantages – at another port we have push'd over the River 2000 men – to day another body and tomorrow the whole army will follow – The troops behav'd like

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men contending for every thing that was dear and valuable – It must give a sensible pleasure to every friend to the rights of America to think with how much intrepidity our people push'd the enemy & prevented their forming in the Town these bugbears, I hope will now be strip'd of their Lions skin [*struck*: & shall people] the people will see I hope that nothing but an exertion of their own strength is wanting to chase tyranny from this Country devoted to Liberty [*struck*: May that Being] [*inserted*: His Excellency] The General has done me the unmerited great honor of thanking me in public orders in terms strong & polite – This circumstance I should blush to mention to any other than to you my dear Lucy & I am fearful [5] that even my Lucy may think her Harry possesd of a [*struck*: little] Species of little vanity in doing at all – It is an exceeding great satisfaction to amind of any sensibility to find [*struck*: the] approbation succeeding well meant endeavors. – I was in hopes I should have been on my way from Philadelphia to Hartford 'ere this, but this matter has prevented me for the present – my business will render my going there indispensible this winter & then I hope to have the happiness of being for a few days with my Lucy at N Haven or Boston – I wish to know at what place you are – I rec<sup>d</sup> a queer note from Peter but it inform'd me neither of one thing or another – may that kind Being who [*struck*: protects] presides over thee in quality of a Guardian angel, keep vigilant watch that no evils befall thee or thy babe & render the safe to your anxiously tender Husband

Harry

M<sup>rs</sup> Knox

[*address leaf*]

M<sup>rs</sup>. Lucy Knox

at

N. Haven

or

Boston

to be forwarded by the favor Maj<sup>or</sup> Pollard

[*docket*]

Dec<sup>r</sup>. 26<sup>th</sup> 1776