

Americans lose the Battle of Fort Washington, 1776

On this day in history, November 16, 1776, the Americans lose the Battle of Fort Washington. **Fort Washington sat on the highest point of Manhattan Island, then called York Island. It was built in the summer of that year to prevent British ships from sailing up the Hudson River** after George Washington and his officers had decided the area would be impenetrable by the British. Fort Washington sat on one side of the Hudson, while Fort Lee sat on the other side. Fire from the two forts, along with a series of impediments constructed in the river would prevent the British from advancing deeper into New York.

After the British abandoned Boston, George Washington concentrated on the defense of New York City. The British began landing troops on Staten Island unopposed in July and by August had 32,000 men in the area. They quickly conquered Long Island and attacked Manhattan in mid-September, driving Washington's men all the way north to White Plains.

Washington left a contingent of 1200 men, under the command of Colonel Robert Magaw, to defend Fort Washington and hopefully the Hudson River Valley. In late October, Magaw's men had the chance to prove the value of the Fort when two British ships attempted to go upriver. The ships were badly damaged and had to be towed back downriver by the British.

George Washington's army was defeated at White Plains on October 28 causing him to flee and separate his army. British General William Howe marched his forces back to Manhattan to take Fort Washington and drive the Americans from the island for good. Some wanted Washington to abandon the Fort, but several of his chief officers believed it was defensible and advised him to defend the Fort, which he did.

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Washington went with part of his troops down the western side of the Hudson to Fort Lee, across the Hudson from Fort Washington. On the morning of November 16, Howe's men began their attack on the Fort with a three pronged attack from three sides. The American positions around the Fort fell quickly and Washington, who had come over from Fort Lee, along with several of his key generals were forced to flee back across the river. **The Americans were severely outnumbered and the British stormed the Fort once the outer defenses fell.** 59 Americans were killed and 96 were wounded at the Battle of Fort Washington, **but the biggest loss was 2,838 men that were captured, along with 34 cannons and a great deal of supplies and ammunition. Of the 2,800 men that were captured, 2,000 died in British captivity due to unsanitary conditions. The remaining 800 were released in a prisoner exchange 18 months later.**

Washington and his army were driven across New Jersey and into Pennsylvania by the end of the year. **The loss of Fort Washington crowned a string of losses that seemed to indicate the Americans were no match for their British counterparts and many Americans lost hope that they could win the war. George Washington turned the tide though, when he attacked the Hessian garrison at Trenton, New Jersey on Christmas Eve and the British at Princeton a week later. These victories helped restore American morale, encouraging them to fight on.**