

New Jersey militiamen skirmish with British Patrol at Howell's Ferry, December 20th, 1776

On this day in history, December 20, 1776, New Jersey militiamen skirmish with a British patrol at Howell's Ferry, one of numerous such incidents that occurred as the British army occupied central New Jersey during the American Revolution.

The Continental Army had been driven out of New York and across New Jersey by the British, but George Washington, after crossing the Delaware River into Pennsylvania, had cleverly commandeered every single boat for seventy miles up and down the river, preventing the British from crossing.

British Commander Sir William Howe decided it was time to winter his army, instead of pursuing Washington's ragtag army, which he believed was all but defeated anyway. Howe sent many of his troops back to New York for winter quarters and left the remaining troops scattered across New Jersey in various outposts, at places such as Bordentown, Trenton, Princeton, New Brunswick and Burlington.

The citizens of New Jersey immediately began an uprising, harassing the occupiers in every way they could. The small towns were easy enough for the British garrisons to control, many of which were virtually ghost towns, having been evacuated by the citizens when the British arrived. Controlling the countryside, however, was an entirely different matter. British soldiers going out on foraging expeditions, reconnaissance missions or with dispatches to other outposts could be attacked by New Jersey militia anywhere along the highways and byways. British casualties quickly began to mount.

Colonel Johann Rall was the senior officer stationed at Trenton. His men were being harassed so badly from the countryside that he had to send 100 men just to get a message safely through to Princeton which was only 13 miles away! On the 20th, Rall sent a patrol to Howell's Ferry, four

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miles upriver from Trenton. They were met by 150 Hunterdon County militiamen who had come across the river from their headquarters at Yardley's Ferry on the Pennsylvania side. The Americans lost a few men in the skirmish, but this event and numerous others show what the British were facing. Rall could barely control the territory around him.

Rall's men at Trenton were harassed to the point that he commanded them to stay dressed and armed at all times, even while sleeping. They were constantly awakened by rumors, alarms or actual attacks to the point that they were tired, scared and worn out. Morale was extremely low. In this condition, Colonel Rall received news on the 25th from two deserters and from a spy in the American camp that Washington was planning an attack on Trenton early on the morning of the 26th. Rall could hardly believe it because he considered Washington's army to be defeated and in retreat, but the recent harassment in the countryside made him wary.

Contrary to the commonly held viewpoint that the Hessian garrison at Trenton was drunk on Christmas Eve and therefore unprepared for Washington's attack, Rall's men were at the height of alarm all day on the 25th, prepared and waiting for an American attack. Indeed, Rall was confident that, if an attack were to come, it would easily be put down. If this is so, what caused them to put their guard down and be captured, nearly 1,000 of them, early the next morning in the First Battle of Trenton? The answer - A severe snowstorm started in the evening that was so bad the Hessians began to relax. There was no way an army could march through that snow! Their guard was put down to the point that even patrols for the next morning were cancelled and the Hessians went soundly to bed, only to be surrounded and arrested en masse early the next morning!