

WASHINGTON'S MARCH TO TRENTON  
ON  
CHRISTMAS NIGHT IN 1776

BY

DR. CARLOS E. GODFREY

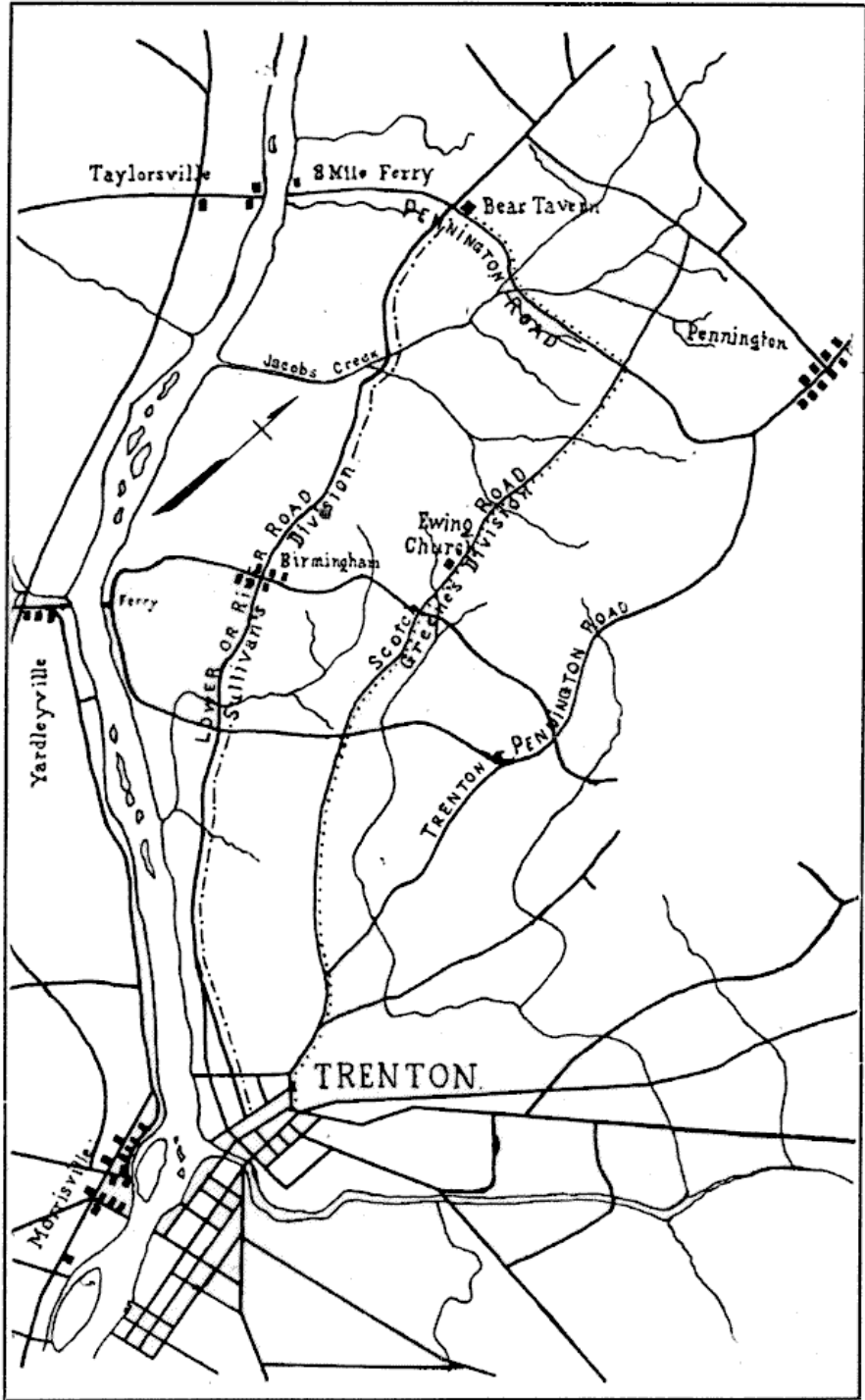
---

An address delivered before  
The Trenton Historical Society  
March 20, 1924

J974.966  
G583 W

copy 3-

1924  
THE TRENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
TRENTON, NEW JERSEY



WASHINGTON'S MARCH TO TRENTON  
 HIGHWAYS TRAVERSED  
 A SURVEY OF 1833

## WASHINGTON'S MARCH TO TRENTON ON CHRISTMAS NIGHT IN 1776

The capture of the Hessian garrison at Trenton in New Jersey, which so thrilled the patriotic Americans with joy in the month of December 1776, has been classified as one of the most important, unique and successful engagements that can be found in the annals of warfare. Its stirring events have been portrayed time and again as a popular theme by many of our distinguished historians, but probably none so exhaustive and accurate as that heretofore told by our late General William S. Stryker in his "Battles of Trenton and Princeton."

In perusing these various narratives we find a general uniformity of all material circumstances which they relate with the single exception of the highways traversed by the Continental troops, and in this particular there exist decided and conflicting statements. In view of this difference of opinion among historians, and particularly at a time when we are engaged in erecting a National Park on both sides of the Delaware at McKonkey's Ferry for the purpose of commemorating the spot where the illustrious Washington crossed with his army into New Jersey on Christmas Night in 1776, my address will be confined to this subject.

When it was determined to make an assault on the enemy at Trenton in the council of war held on the evening of December 24, 1776,<sup>1</sup> among other preparations then approved by the general officers of the Continental army was the **ORDER OF MARCH TO TRENTON.**\* This instrument is a literary gem, pointing out, as it does, with brevity and clearness every possible essential for the successful movement of the troops destined for this service.

The order provided that the troops should be divided into two divisions; the First Division, or the right wing, was to be commanded by Major General John Sullivan; while Major General Nathaniel Greene was directed to assume command of the Second Division, or left wing of the army;

constituting, in the aggregate, an enlisted strength of about 2,400 men;<sup>2</sup> and otherwise estimated at 2,700 men, consisting of 1,500 men in Sullivan's division and 1,200 in Greene's.<sup>3</sup> The order not only specified what organizations should compose these commands, but designated the particular troops which should form the advance and reserve corps of both divisions and the number of pieces of artillery that should be attached to each, including the second brigade of the respective wings. It also provided that a troop of cavalry should precede each division as rapidly as possible, with instructions to "post themselves on the road about three miles from Trenton and make prisoners of all going in or coming out of town."<sup>\*</sup>

Towards twilight in the afternoon of the following day—Christmas—these troops were directed to assemble "in the valley over the hill" one mile west of McKonkey's Ferry, with three days' cooked rations, and there hold themselves in readiness to march to the ferry for embarkation on boats across the river Delaware under the direction of Colonel Henry Knox.<sup>\*†</sup>

The order further provided that the army should be transported across the ferry in the following rotation: General Stephen's brigade, with a detachment of artillerymen; and the brigades of Mercer, Lord Stirling and de Fermoy; designated the Second Division of the army. The embarkation of these troops was followed by those of the First Division, in the order mentioned and consisting of the brigades of St. Clair, Glover and Sargent.<sup>\*</sup> Immediately after the debarkation of these troops on the Jersey shore the batteries of Captains Neil, Hugg, Moulder, Sargent, Forrest, Bauman and Hamilton were ferried across the Delaware, when the first four named units were assigned to the First Division, and the remainder to the Second Division, of the army.<sup>4</sup>

The weather on Christmas Night was intensely cold; the wind was high, and accompanied with hail and snow. The ice floated down the river in such quantities that the passage of the troops was not effected until three o'clock in the morning, three hours behind scheduled time.<sup>5††</sup> The sentries which had been stationed by General Stephen around the

landing-place on the Jersey shore were then called in to rejoin the assembled troops,<sup>6</sup> which had been formed in files of eight men abreast.† It was near four o'clock when General Greene, who was accompanied by Washington, gave the order for his division to march out on the Pennington road towards Bear Tavern. This force was immediately followed by the First Division of troops, under the command of General Sullivan. Before moving out on the highway, however, the watches of all officers were set with that carried by General Washington, for the purpose of regulating not only the movement of the army but to make the combined attacks of the two columns on the Hessians simultaneous.<sup>7</sup> At the same time profound silence was enjoined against all officers and men during the march, "and no man to quit his ranks on the pain of death."\*

Before proceeding it is highly essential that we make an observation of the highways that radiated at this period from McKonkey's Ferry easterly and southerly towards Trenton. The road in New Jersey which led from the ferry was known as the Pennington Road, and ran east of north; and one and a quarter-miles from the river it crossed the River Road at Bear Tavern, eight miles from Trenton; two miles further it crossed the Scotch Road, seven miles from Trenton; and one and a quarter miles still further it met the direct road from Trenton to the village of Pennington, about seven miles from Trenton.<sup>8</sup>

From the Bear Tavern, on the River road to Birmingham the distance is three and a half miles, and from Birmingham to Trenton four and a half miles. From Birmingham across to the Scotch road the distance is about a mile; from this point to its junction with the Pennington road is two and a quarter miles; and from thence to Trenton one mile.<sup>8</sup> We must recollect, however, that the present River road did not then exist.

When the Continental troops reached Bear Tavern on the Pennington road it is generally believed, and especially by those who reside within the vicinity of Trenton, that both divisions of the army were then wheeled to the right into the River road and led down that highway by Washington

to the village of Birmingham; when he, with Greene's division, crossed over from this point to the Scotch road, while the rear division with Sullivan continued down the River road, to attack the enemy at Trenton.

In tracing this version of the march of the troops from Bear Tavern to its source, I find that it first emanated from the pen of James Wilkinson when he published his *Memoirs* in 1816.<sup>9</sup> Of course Major Wilkinson was a staff-officer in Sullivan's division and accompanied its march down the River road in 1776; but his statement was written forty years after its occurrence and at a time, says Dr. Ernest C. Richardson of Princeton University, when his memory of events was "not always trustworthy."<sup>10</sup> However, Wilkinson's account of the march was subsequently incorporated in the histories of Barber and Howe,<sup>11</sup> George Bancroft,<sup>12</sup> Charles C. Haven,<sup>13</sup> Colonel Henry B. Carrington,<sup>14</sup> and General William S. Stryker.<sup>15</sup>

As a matter of fact General Washington never led Greene's division down the River road to Birmingham! My funda-

---

The *Memoirs* of James Wilkinson, written in 1816, must be tested by the laws of historical criticism. Washington settled his *ORDER OF MARCH TO TRENTON* on the twenty-fourth of December 1776, and did but adhere to it on the twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth. Wilkinson's *Memoirs* were written by him in advanced years exclusively to refute a publication made by Daniel Clark in 1809 entitled "Proofs of the corruption of General James Wilkinson and of his connexion with Aaron Burr," which, among his other tribulations, embraced the charge of treason. These memoirs are self-laudatory, have no voucher but its author, and contain a statement which is certainly exactly opposite the truth. Forty years after the event, Wilkinson tells us that the Continental army on Christmas Night in 1776 came down the River road from McKonkey's Ferry and separated into two columns at the village of Birmingham. This story is not supported either by General Washington nor by any of his officers or by contemporary writers, and the contemporary writers are very numerous and careful. Again, when the muskets of some of the men of Sullivan's division were discovered at Birmingham to be wet from the storm, Wilkinson professes to remember how pitifully the division commander appealed to one of his officers to ask "What is to be done?" This action was not a characteristic of Major John Sullivan! Wilkinson further observes (*Memoirs*, Vol. I, 139) that the headquarters of General St. Clair at the second battle of Trenton were located, "if memory serves me, in the house of a Miss Dagworthy." There are several persons in Trenton today who are familiar with the title of the Alexander Douglas property, the house of which was occupied as the headquarters of General St. Clair, and who know that this statement is not true. Mistakes like these are quite common in Wilkinson's work.

mental authority for this assertion comes from Washington himself. In the ORDER OF MARCH TO TRENTON he directs that Sullivan's division should proceed to Trenton from McKonkey's Ferry on the "River Road," and Greene's division by way of the "Pennington Road."\* On December 27, 1776 General Washington wrote to the President of Congress and told him, among other things, that one division of his troops marched to Trenton "by the Lower or River road, and the other by the Upper or Pennington road."††

This statement of Washington is verified by a daily diary published in Stryker's "Battles of Trenton and Princeton" at page 360, entitled a "Diary of an Officer on Washington's Staff." I have recently ascertained that this diary was kept by Captain Thomas Forrest, who commanded a battery of artillery attached to the advance corps of Greene's division.<sup>16</sup> In it for December 25, 1776, at six o'clock in the evening, is recorded: "Both divisions are to go from the ferry to Bear Tavern, two miles. They will separate there; Washington will accompany Greene's division with a part of the artillery down the Pennington road; Sullivan and the rest of the artillery will take the River road." On the following day, at noon, the diary further recites: "The two divisions divided at Bear Tavern."‡

Furthermore, we are individually informed by Lord Stirling<sup>17</sup> and Robert Morris<sup>18</sup> that immediately after the two divisions began their march from McKonkey's Ferry they proceeded towards Trenton by *two distinct routes*. These assertions are later but contemporaneously confirmed in unmistakable language by other reliable authorities;<sup>19</sup> and, when taken in connection with Washington's own statements, they estop all possibility of the two divisions of the American army marching in single column down the River road.

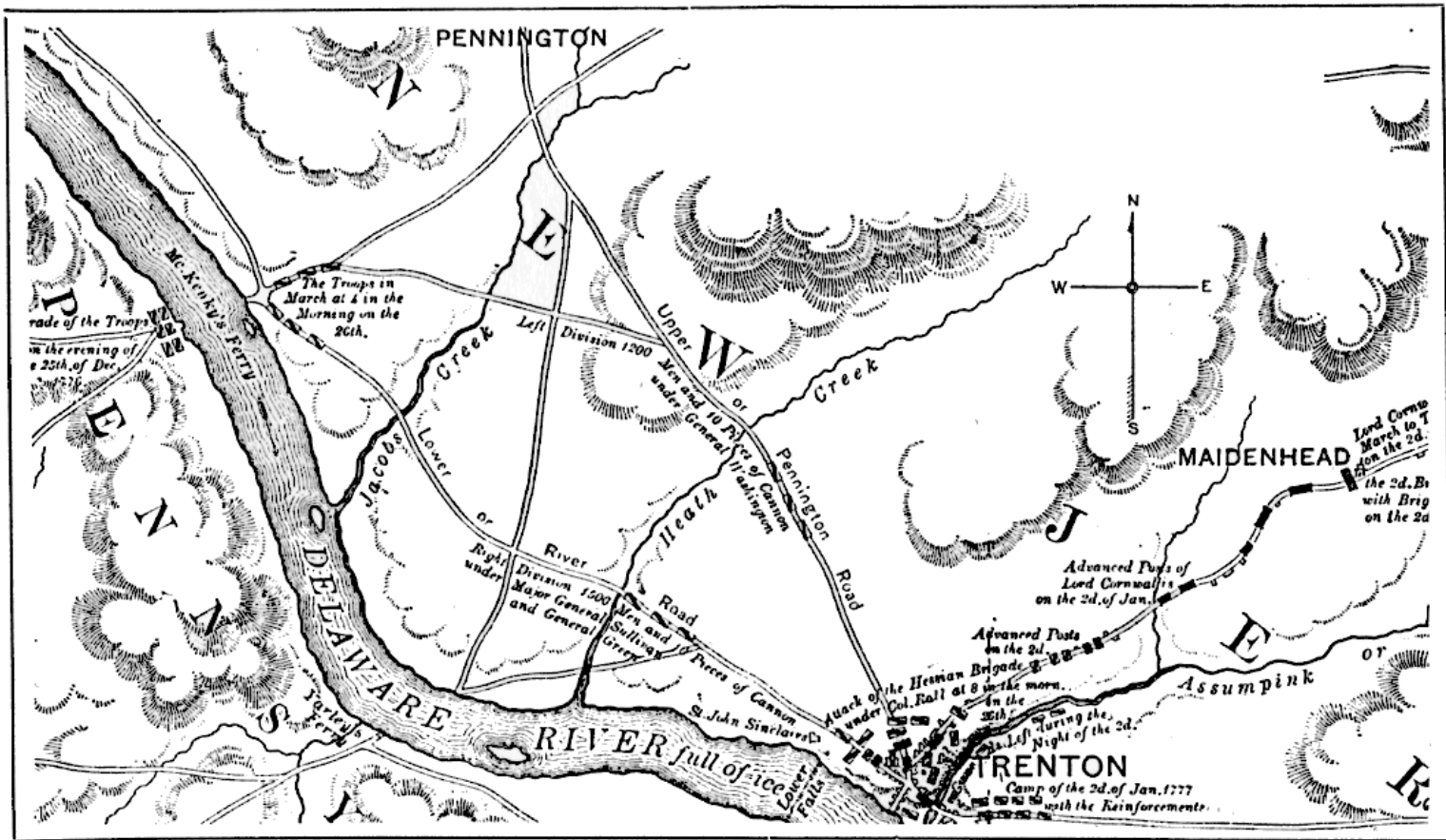
The question then arises what highway did General Washington understand to be the "Upper or Pennington road?" It is perfectly clear that that term was used by him in contradistinction to the "Lower or River road." He could not possibly mean the road which runs from the present Warren Street in Trenton to the borough of Pennington! If we place ourselves in the position of Washington at Newtown,

in Pennsylvania, and order troops at McKonkey's Ferry to cross the Delaware and march out the "Pennington Road," it cannot be any other highway than that which extends easterly from the ferry, passing the River road at Bear Tavern, and continuing thence towards Pennington. This contention is similarly expressed in the Forrest Diary, just referred to, when it says that *after the two divisions separate at Bear Tavern* "Washington will accompany Greene's division with a part of the artillery down the Pennington road."

General Washington was not personally familiar with our Colonial highways in this section of New Jersey, and when he stated to the President of Congress that the left wing of the American army advanced to Trenton on the "Upper or Pennington road," he unquestionably meant, by use of the term "Upper" in connection with the words "Pennington road," the route which was then otherwise slightly,<sup>20</sup> but now more generally, known as the "Scotch Road." If reference is made to Faden's Military Map of the Trenton-Princeton Campaign,<sup>21</sup> published in London on April 15, 1777, it will be seen that the Continental forces separated on Christmas Night at Bear Tavern, the "Right Division" passing down the River road, and the "Left Division" continuing out the Pennington highway and down the Scotch road, to Trenton; which is additional evidence that the column of the patriotic troops was not broken into two divisions at Birmingham.

As I have remarked, the distance from Bear Tavern to Trenton by a circuit of the Pennington and Scotch roads was only a mile longer than that between the same points on the River road; besides, the former route was comparatively level in comparison with the tortuous River road in the deep ravine at Jacobs' Creek, and by reason of these natural conditions troops could make the circuit referred to in sufficient time to enable both columns to descend the parallel highways abreast shortly after Greene's division had entered upon the Scotch road.

Therefore, in compliance with the Order of March, when the head of the column came from McKonkey's Ferry to Bear Tavern, General Washington, with Greene's division,



FADEN'S MAP  
REDUCED SECTIONAL VIEW

continued out along the Pennington highway and made a circuit to Trenton by the Scotch road; and when the rear division, under General Sullivan, came up to the tavern, it immediately turned to the right and passed down the River road. This divisional movement of the troops, moreover, is further confirmed in the Forrest Diary, which states: "At Birmingham, three and a half miles south of the tavern, a man came with a message from General Sullivan that the storm was wetting the muskets and rendering them unfit for service. 'Tell General Sullivan,' said Washington, 'to use the bayonet. I am resolved to take Trenton.'"‡ While it does appear from the statement of some historians that the troops were halted for a brief period about daylight on the parallel roads at the intersection of the highway to Howell's or Yardley's Ferry, nearly a mile apart,<sup>22</sup> it is reasonable to believe that this was done to afford the soldiers an opportunity for rest and refreshments, and also to regulate the time when the two columns should make the simultaneous assault on the Hessian mercenaries.

From a military view, there were imperative reasons why Washington's sagacity prompted this movement of the army; paramount among them was the fact that if his left flank had been surprised on the route down the Scotch road by an effective force of British detachments then stationed at Princeton, Sullivan's division could easily have rallied to his assistance and repelled the attack. Otherwise, if both divisions had marched down the River road in column formation—a line extending nearly a mile in length—and had been surprised on the left by the hostile troops referred to, in all probability it would have been instantly severed, with no supporting forces, and necessarily with disastrous results.

The account of the march of the Continental forces over the highways between McKonkey's Ferry and Trenton, as I have related, is the true story of the procedure, and in conformity with that carefully outlined by Justin Winsor in his "Narrative and Critical History of America."<sup>23</sup> It is likewise the movement which has been similarly expressed and approved by General Francis V. Greene and by other eminent and well-known historians,<sup>23</sup> since Wilkinson's statement to

the contrary, and in harmony with the contemporary authorities which I have produced.

Thus the preponderance of evidence herewith submitted negatives the possibility of Washington's troops separating into two columns at Birmingham, which circumstance in fact occurred at Bear Tavern on Christmas Night in 1776.

#### AUTHORITIES.

- \* Appendix No. 1. P. 12.
  - † Appendix No. 2. P. 13.
  - ‡ Appendix No. 3. P. 13.
  - †† Appendix No. 4. P. 14.
1. Stryker—Battles of Trenton and Princeton, 112.
  2. American Archives (5th Ser.), Vol. III, 1461, 1442.  
Memoirs of Tench Tilghman, 148.
  3. Winsor—Narrative & Critical History of America, Vol. VI, 410,  
note.
  4. Stryker—Battles of Trenton and Princeton, 142.
  5. American Archives (5th Ser.), Vol. III, 1443.  
Sparks—Writings of George Washington, Vol. IV, 246.
  6. Stryker—Battles of Trenton and Princeton, 139.
  7. Stryker—Battles of Trenton and Princeton, 129, 375.  
Bonney—Legacy of Historical Gleanings, 57.
  8. Barber & Howe—Historical Collections of New Jersey (Ed. 1844),  
292.
  9. Wilkinson—Memoirs of My Own Times, Vol. I, 128.
  10. A. L. A.—The Literature of American History, Year 1902, Item  
1706.
  11. Barber & Howe—Historical Collections of New Jersey (Ed. 1844),  
292-297.
  12. Bancroft—History of the United States (Ed. 1866), Vol. IX, 232.
  13. Haven—Historic Manual, 27-28.
  14. Carrington—Battles of the American Revolution, 272-273.
  15. Stryker—Battles of Trenton and Princeton, 140-142.
  16. Wilkinson—Memoirs of My Own Times, Vol. I, 129, note.  
Headley—Washington and His Generals, Vol. I, 213.  
Irving—Life of George Washington, Vol. II, 481.  
Smith—The St. Clair Papers, Vol. I, 31-32.
  17. Stryker—Battles of Trenton and Princeton, 367.  
See—Pennsylvania Magazine of History, Vol. X, 203.  
See—American Archives (5th Ser.), Vol. III, 1442.
  18. Stevens' Facsimile, No. 1397, p. 13.
  19. Hall—History of the Civil War in America (Ed. 1780), Vol. I,  
252-253.  
Hazard—The Register of Pennsylvania, Vol. II, 154-155.  
Gordon—History of the Independence of the United States (Ed.  
1788), Vol. II, 394-395.  
Ramsay—History of the American Revolution (Ed. 1793), 319-320.  
Stedman—History of the American War (Ed. 1794), Vol. I, 232.  
Marshall—Life of George Washington (Ed. 1805), Vol. II, 497-498.
  20. New Jersey Archives, Vol. XII, 643.
  21. Opposite page 8.

22. Campbell—Revolutionary Services of General William Hull, 59.  
Irving—Life of George Washington, Vol. II, 478-479.
23. Greene—The Revolutionary War, 66-67.  
Botta—History of the War of Independence (Ed. 1820), Vol. II, 217.  
Headley—Washington and His Generals, Vol. I, 212-213.  
Campbell—Revolutionary Services of General William Hull, 59.  
Irving—Life of George Washington, Vol. II, 478-479.  
Lossing—Field Book of the Revolution (Ed. 1860), Vol. II, 20.  
Woodward—History of Burlington & Mercer Counties, 589.  
Lee—New Jersey as a Colony and as a State, Vol. II, 146.  
See—Gordon, History of New Jersey, 226.  
See—McSherry, History of Maryland (Ed. 1849), 211.  
See—Raum, History of New Jersey, Vol. I, 441.

## APPENDIX.

### No. 1. ORDER OF MARCH TO TRENTON.

Reference: Drake—Life of Henry Knox, 133.  
Stryker—Battles of Trenton and Princeton, 113.

Each brigade to be furnished with two good guides. Gen. Stephen's brigade to form the advance party, and 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. Gen. Stephen is to attack and force the enemy's guards and sieze 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 brigades of Mercer and Lord Stirling, under the command of Major-Gen. Greene, to support Gen. Stephen. This is the 2d division or left wing of the army, and to march by the way of the Pennington road.

St. Clair's, Glovers, and Sargent's brigades, under Major-Gen. 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 Gen. St. Clair's brigade the reserve of the right wing. These reserves to form a second line in conjunction, or a second line 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 posts of the brigades in the line.

Four pieces of artillery to march at the head of each column; three pieces at the head of the second brigade of each division; and two pieces with each of the reserves. The troops to be assembled one mile back of McKonkey's Ferry, and as soon as it begins to grow dark the troops to be marched to McKonkey's Ferry, and embark on board the boats in following order under the direction of Col. Knox.

Gen. Stephen's brigade, with the detachment of artillerymen, to embark first; Gen. Mercer's next; Lord Stirling's next; Gen. Fermoy's next, who will march in the rear of the second division, and file off from the Pennington to the Princeton road in such direction that he can with the greatest ease and safety secure the passes between Princeton and Trenton. The guides will be the best judges of this. He is to take two pieces of artillery with him. St. Clair's, Glover's, and Sargent's brigades to embark in order. Immediately upon their debarkation, the whole to form and march in subdivisions from the right. The commanding officers of regiments to observe that the divisions be equal, and that proper officers be appointed to each. A profound silence to be enjoined, and 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 head of the columns to be appointed to arrive at Trenton at five o'clock.

Captain Washington and Capt. T———, with a party of forty men each, to march before the divisions and post themselves on the road about three miles from Trenton, and make prisoners of all going in or coming out of town.

Gen. Stephen will appoint a guard to form a chain of sentries 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 go in or come out, but to detain all persons who attempt either. This guard to join their brigade when the troops are all over.

No. 2.

## BRIGADE ORDERS.

General Mercer to Colonel Durkee, Dec. 25, 1776.

Sir; You are to see that your men have three day's provisions ready cooked before 12 o'clock this forenoon—the whole fit for duty except a Serjeant and six men to be left with the baggage, and to parade precisely at four in the afternoon with their arms, accoutrements & ammunition in the best order, with their provisions and blankets—you will have them told off in divisions in which order they are to march—eight men abreast, with the officers fixed to their divisions from which they are on no account to separate—no man is to quit his division on pain of instant punishment—each officer is to provide himself with a piece of white paper stuck in his hat for a field mark. You will order your men to assemble and parade them in the valley immediately over the hill on the back of McConkey's' Ferry, to remain there for further orders—a profound silence is to be observed, both by officers and men, and a strict and ready attention paid to whatever orders may be given—in forming the Brigade Col. Durkee & Col. Rawlings on the Right of Col. Stone—the Line to form & march from the Right—Col. Hutchinson to form by themselves.

Your obt S'v't, H. Mercer.

## No. 3. DIARY OF AN OFFICER ON WASHINGTON'S STAFF.

Reference: Stryker—Battles of Trenton and Princeton, 360.

New Town, Pa., Dec. 22, 1776.

Dec. 23—Orders have been issued to cook rations for three days. Washington has just given the counter sign, "Victory or Death." He has written a letter to General Cadwallader at Bristol, which he has intrusted me to copy. He intends to cross the river, make a ten-mile march to Trenton, and attack Rall just before daybreak. \*\*\*\*\*

Dec. 25—Christmas morning. \*\*\*\*\*

Christmas, 6 P. M.—\*\*\*\*\*. I have just copied the order for marching. Both divisions are to go from the ferry to Bear Tavern, two miles. They will separate there; Washington will accompany Greene's division with a part of the artillery down the Pennington Road; Sullivan and the rest of the artillery will take the River road.

Dec. 26, 3 a. m.—I am writing in the ferry house. The troops are all over, and the boats have gone back for the artillery. We are three hours behind the set time. \*\*\*\*\*. I never have seen Washington so determined as he is now. He stands on the bank of the river, wrapped in his cloak, superintending the landing of his troops. He is calm and collected, but very determined. \*\*\*\*\*. The last cannon is being landed, and we are ready to mount our horses.

Dec. 26. Noon—It was nearly 4 o'clock when we started. The two divisions divided at Bear Tavern.

At Birmingham, three and a half miles south of the tavern, a man came with a message from General Sullivan that the storm was wetting the muskets and rendering them unfit for service. "Tell General Sullivan," said Washington, "to use the bayonet. I am resolved to take Trenton."

It was broad daylight when we came to a house where a man was chopping wood. He was very much surprised when he saw us. "Can you tell me where the Hessian picket is?" Washington asked. The man hesitated, but I said, "You need not be frightened, it is General Washington who asks the question." His face brightened and he pointed toward the house of Mr. Howell.

It was just 8 o'clock. Looking down the road I saw a Hessian running out from the house. He yelled in Dutch and swung his arms. Three or four others came out with their guns. Two of them fired at us, but the bullets whistled over our heads. \*\*\*\*\*

---

No. 4. LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT OF CONGRESS.

Reference: Sparks—Writings of George Washington, Vol. IV, 246.

Head-Quarters, Newtown, 27 December, 1776.

Sir: I have the pleasure of congratulating you upon the success of an enterprise, which I had formed against a detachment of the enemy lying in Trenton, and which was executed yesterday morning. The evening of the 25th I ordered the troops intended for this service to parade back of McKonkey's Ferry, that they might begin to pass as soon as it grew dark, imagining we should be able to throw them all over, with the necessary artillery, by twelve o'clock, and that we might easily arrive at Trenton by five in the morning, the distance being about nine miles. But the quantity of ice, made that night, impeded the passage of the boats so much, that it was three o'clock before the artillery could all be got over; and near four, before the troops took up their line of march. \*\*\*\*\* I formed my detachment into two divisions, one to march by the lower or river road, the other by the upper or Pennington road. As the divisions had nearly the same distance to march, I ordered each of them, immediately upon forcing the out-guards, to push directly into the town, that they might charge the enemy before they had time to form.

The upper division arrived at the enemy's advanced post exactly at eight o'clock; and in three minutes after, I found, from the fire on the lower road, that that division had also got up. \*\*\*\*\*