Chapter One

Washington Crossing the Delaware, a painting by Emanuel Leutze, hangs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. This painting is perhaps one of the most recognized in American history, but few know the whole story of this treacherous crossing of the icy Delaware River, the terrible battles that followed. Amidst the darkest hours of the revolution, General George Washington led a ragtag force against one of the mightiest militaries in the world. The American effort would stun the world and revitalize the Patriots cause.

Chapter Two: A Conquering Wind

For more than a year, 13 colonies stood in rebellion to their government, an ocean away. The Americans in revolt were rebels. The Declaration of Independence made them revolutionaries. 13 colonies were now a union of states. Then in union, they claimed independence, disseminating copies of their great declaration through the land. In New York City, the Declaration was read aloud to an army of volunteers. On that day, July 9th, 1776, they at last knew what they were fighting for – a new nation conceived in liberty.

This army was made up of farmers and tradesmen and artisans from every walk of life. Their officers were businessmen, lawyers, and planters, mostly amateurs. Even their commander in chief, the most experienced among them, had never led more than a thousand men in combat. Now, General George Washington led 23,000.

Independence – however grandly declared – would not be won by word. And while Americans cheered, a British Army, 25,000 strong, more than half of the Armed Forces of the British Empire, descended upon New York to contest the argument. British soldiers under General William Howe were well-trained, well-equipped, well-paid, and their ranks were bolstered by German contract soldiers. These Hessians, famous for their skill and feared for their fierce fighting ability, made up over 1/3 of the British Army.

In short order, they swept Washington's army in battle after battle, from Brooklyn to New York City, Manhattan, White Plains, the Jersey Palisades, leaving little to stop them from seizing Philadelphia, the seat of the fledgling nation. With mounting defeats, joy was replaced by desperation. Many of Washington's soldiers deserted for home as they retreated south. By December 1776, only 3,800 were left.

Washington despaired of what the future might bring, writing, “I am wearied almost to death.” British General Howe was convinced Washington and the American army had lost the will to fight. It was hard to disagree. New York City had fallen, and the British occupation spread to control three colonies. The Continental Army was badly beaten, outflanked, demoralized. The rebellion seemed doomed. Washington's army, the Americans, the United States, needed a miracle

Chapter Three: The American Crisis

As the British and Hessian soldiers occupied New Jersey, they behaved like conquerors; ravaging homes, stealing property, not bothering to distinguish between patriot or loyalist. But Americans would not be idle victims. Incensed by the depredations, bands of New Jersey militiamen began to raid and attack small isolated British units.

And Thomas Paine, the author of Common Sense, the popular voice of the American Revolution, while marching south with Washington's army, captured the desperate hopes of the moment. “These are the times that try men's souls,” he wrote. “The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will in this crisis shrink from the service of their country. But he that stands by it now deserves the love and thanks of man
and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered. But the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.”

Paine’s words spread like wildfire amongst the patriots that winter. His American crisis essays were read in taverns and churches, courthouses and state houses, and on the banks of the Delaware - in the tents and around the campfires of Washington's army. Stoked by the harsh British occupation, and inspired by Paine's stirring call to duty, Washington's army had begun to grow again. By mid-December, over 7,000 men gathered, prepared to defend the cause; a cause that the British considered already dead.

Aided by spies in the field, Washington realized that while the British had more soldiers, they were thinly scattered along outposts and towns throughout New Jersey. And one of the most important outposts, Trenton, isolated by poor rules, was especially vulnerable. If Washington could cross the Delaware quickly, he could strike the Trenton outpost before enemy reinforcements might arrive. All would depend on stealth and speed. But how could he quickly cross the Delaware River, a task that had recently taken a smaller army five days?

Time was not on Washington’s side. By late December, most of his soldiers’ enlistments would end: his army would disappear. “By perseverance and fortitude, we have the prospect of a glorious issue,” wrote Paine, “but by cowardice and submission, sad choice is a ravaged country and slavery without hope.” If, as Paine pointed out, salvation was at hand, Washington would test it with a very bold move.

Chapter Four: Washington’s Crossing

Washington's plan is risky. On Christmas Night, in the dead of winter, his army would cross the Delaware River at three points and trap the Hessians at Trenton. Washington, with 2400 soldiers and much of the artillery, would march to Trenton for the main attack. James Ewing's brigade of 800 Pennsylvania militiamen would seize the bridges across Assunpink Creek. And Colonel John Cadwalader’s 1,200 Philadelphia associators and 600 Continentals would distract the Hessian grenadiers and Scottish Highlanders stationed at Burlington.

But this grand design began to unravel almost as soon as it started. Huge chunks of ice made the Delaware almost impassable. Ewing’s troops at Trenton Ferry and Cadwallader’s force further south both failed across the river. Washington's main strike force fared little better, moving slowly as the light rain gave way to driving hail and snow. 2,400 men, as well as horses, and eighteen pieces of field artillery, each gun weighing around 2,000 pounds, needed to be ferried across the icy river Washington himself crossed first and watched the rest of his army struggle to follow. When they all finally reached the New Jersey side of the rivers at 3 a.m., they were a full three hours behind his carefully choreographed plan.

Washington brooded over the delay; with his entire army at risk, should he turn back? “As I was certain there was no making a retreat without being discovered and harassed on repassing the river, I determined to push on at all events.” With the icy river behind them, turning back was not an option.

Chapter Five: The Attack

Despite the delays, Washington and his generals decide to follow the original plan. Washington's column approaches Trenton in two wings. Defending Trenton were three battle-hardened Hessian regiments, 1500 men under the command of Colonel Johann Gottlieb Rahl. Contrary to legend, they were not drunk or even drinking. Instead, they were on high alert. Hessian pickets guard the approaches to Trenton. Those not on duty sleep in battle dress, loaded muskets within reach.
Despite the preparations, Rahl’s men are caught by surprise. Erroneously believing Washington has the town encircled, but considering the American’s poor soldiers, Rahl orders his men to counter-attack. Knox's field guns and American musket fire shatter their brave try. Rallying his men for one last frontal assault, Rahl is shot twice in the side. He’ll die later that night.

When the remaining Hessians attempts to retreat, their only route of escape is cut off by General Sullivan's arriving color. Though some Haitians make it out, Washington's men capture almost 900, and inflict a hundred casualties. As the captured arms, equipment, cannon, and gunpowder is tallied, Washington is forced to confront his own losses. Despite suffering many wounded and others incapacitated by the severe weather, he reports on several killed, men who froze to death in the unforgiving cold.

But more valuable than guns or ammunition was the victory itself. Though his attack was behind schedule, his conditions fraught with rain, snow, sleet, and his enemy was at the ready, General Washington had shocked the greatest Empire of the day. A British officer foresaw the implications, writing of Trenton, “I was exceedingly concerned as it will tend to revive the drooping spirits of the rebels and increased their force.”

Chapter Six: A Second Crossing

There was little time to rest or celebrate. Laden with captured supplies, Washington's army slipped across the river back into Pennsylvania. He knew that a single victory was not enough. Plus, time was running out. The soldiers’ enlistments ended in a matter of days. On December 27, just a day after capturing Trenton, Washington learned that Colonel Cadwallader’s 1800 Pennsylvanians had crossed into New Jersey, probing the British defenses. Their reports indicated that the British were panicking and falling back. Was this the moment to strike another blow?

Washington asked for an honest assessment from his advisors. At first, some argued that a second crossing would tempt fate. Others pressed for action. As they debated into the night, the consensus began to shift as more realized that without another victory, Trenton could be dismissed as a lucky blow. Soon, they all agreed; they would move immediately.

Once again, the weather doesn't cooperate. If the first crossing was bad, the second was worse. Yet, by New Year's Eve, most of the army is across the river, back in Trenton. New Year's Eve is also the day that many of his soldiers terms of enlistment ended. Some were leaving for home; others could not be compelled to stay; and if they left, his army would collapse.

Washington appeals to his men's patriotism; “You have done all I asked you to do and more, but your country is at stake, your wives your houses and all that you hold dear. You have worn yourselves out, but we know not how to spare you. If you will stay on one month longer, you will render that service to the cause of liberty and to your country, which you will probably never do under any other circumstances.” His words were bolstered by $10 in hard coin for every man who stepped forward. It worked; his army remained, soon to fight again.

Chapter Seven: The Battle of Second Trenton

6,800 Americans ushered in the new year of 1777 east of Trenton along Assunpink Creek. The British had pulled back to Princeton, 11 miles away. Lord Charles Cornwallis, who had chased Washington's army across the New Jersey countryside, moved to confront Washington with over 8,000 troops, including a body of Hessians intent on revenge. Washington intended to meet them on good ground. Yet, with the Delaware River at his back, there was no easy way to escape if the British forced to retreat. To
buy time, Washington orders a thousand men to harass Cornwallis's force as they approach from the north. The delaying force falls back across a stone bridge over Assunpink Creek.

As British musket balls whistle by, Washington rolled to the bridge to greet them, inspiring confidence and assurance to his men. Assured of his army's superiority, Cornwallis orders three successive and bloody assaults across the narrow bridges and lower fords. In the face of blistering American cannon and musket fire, all British attempts fail as the light disappears. For his rash assault, Cornwallis lost 365 men. For the Americans who continued to hold their defensive line along the creek, the losses were 100. For the second time in two weeks, Washington and his ragtag army had proven their medal against some of the best combat troops in the world.

**Chapter Eight: A Tale of Two Councils**

Despite his losses, Cornwallis is convinced he has Washington cornered and resolves to finish him off at dawn. But one of his subordinates, Sir William Erskine, warns, “If Washington is the general I take him to be, he will not be found in the morning.” Discovering that a northern Ford provides access to Washington's vulnerable right flank, Erskine advises an immediate attack Across the Assunpink, Washington lays out the stakes for his officers. The loss of this army might be fatal to the country, but a retreat in the face of the enemy would also have lasting negative consequences. They were in a double bind. American Brigadier General Arthur St. Clair proposes a novel solution: the roads northward appeared open. The army could move out of danger, outflank Cornwallis, and take Princeton. Despite some naysayers, all soon agreed it was a daring option. They could escape the danger of Cornwallis's larger army, and, ever aware of public opinion, Washington was sure of one thing; this move would at least avoid the appearance of a retreat.

With the support of his officers, Washington approved the plan. But would they have time to move before Cornwallis attacks? And could they slip away without detection?

The bright fires of the American camp, visible well into the early morning, showed that Washington's men were settled in. General Cornwallis remained confident, saying, “We've got the old Fox safe now. We'll go over and bag him in the morning.” But the American camp fires were a ruse left behind to cover Washington's move. At dawn, Cornwallis was shocked to discover his opponent had slipped away and was on his way to Princeton. The Fox had just executed one of the most brilliant flanking maneuvers in military history.

**Chapter Nine: The Battle of Princeton**

Washington marched his army in two columns throughout the night to Princeton. As the Americans approached, Colonel Charles Mawhood moved south to reinforce Cornwallis with 450 grenadiers, Scottish Highlanders, and ragoons, spots Nathaniel Greene's force. Assessing the situation quickly, Mawhood quickly immediately attacks across a rising field.

The battle begins on Clarke form. After a vicious, bloody firefight, Mawhood orders bayonets fixed and breaks an American Brigade led by General Hugh Mercer. Thinking they've cornered the chief rebel himself General Washington, the British surround, taunt, and bayonet Mercer, leaving him for dead. The arrival of a force under Cadwalader staves off defeat. Aided by a pair of four pound cannons, they slow the British onslaught. But even these efforts proved insufficient, and Cadwalader’s men soon began to give way.

At this moment, Washington himself arrives on the spot, again exposing himself to musket fire, rallying his men with the cry, “Parade with us my brave fellows.” Leading his advance, they forced the British to
break and run. Galloping after the broken remnants, Washington shouts, “It is a fine foxchaes, my boys.” Mawhood and his garrison ultimately flee Princeton, leaving it to the Americans. The British were retreating. In just a matter of weeks. Washington and his army had shattered the illusion of British invincibility.

**Chapter Ten: A Revolution Saved**

Washington had won at Trenton twice, and drove the British from Princeton. Now he contemplates yet another roll of the dice. Brunswick holds a tantalizing cache of stockpiles and few British defenders. But with little sleep in the past two days, his troops are beyond exhaustion. So on January 7th, Washington and the remainder of his victorious army head towards the mountain retreat at Morristown, New Jersey. From here, his army supports the local militias, harassing the British and raiding the countryside, eliminating their supply routes and sources of food.

Like a thousand wasp stings, the raids ultimately forced the British to the relative safety and comfort of New York City. With his army now safely positioned around Morristown, Washington was forced to confront an even deadlier enemy: disease. His battle-worn citizen soldiers huddled in winter encampments were prime targets for the great killer of the revolution smallpox. Fearing discovery through British agents, Washington boldly orders that his entire army be quietly inoculated. This action, mandated in all Continental Army camps, would save countless lives; lives of the various soldiers who would continue the fight for freedom.

Facing what seemed to most on both sides as certain defeat, a ragtag force of Continentals had stunned the British and the world. Washington's bold stroke across the Delaware led to the defeat of three different Hessian and British forces in one brilliant campaign. The once mighty British army, numbering thirty-one thousand in the summer of 1776, had now been reduced to less than half that number, and its great gains of territory had been largely wiped away in New Jersey. Frederick the Great, King of Prussia and one of the world's great military minds, called Washington's exploits those ten fateful days, “the most brilliant of any recorded in the annals of military achievements.”

At the center of this great strategic reversal stood General George Washington. Undaunted by the staggering losses at the summer of 1776, he provided the critical leadership that saved the remnants of the Continental Army and compelled them to victory at Trenton and Princeton. His strength, tempered by flexibility and an open ear, built an army able to absorb defeat, win victories, and, able to turn the dream of a new nation into a lasting reality.