

Twas the night after Christmas in 1776

The Battle of Trenton was fought early on the morning of December 26, 1776. Humiliating defeats pursued the Continental Army for 5 months and it appeared Washington's ill-clothed, barely fed, and literally dying troops were near total annihilation.

It was then, as Americans celebrated the birth of our Savior, an act of Providence occurred which has forever changed the world. Washington's men successfully crossed the freezing Delaware River in sleet and snow to Trenton, New Jersey, determined for victory. The boldness of General Washington exclaimed, "Tell General Sullivan to use the bayonet. I am resolved to take Trenton."

Listen as I give the play by play of this night written by Institute on the Constitution's Chapter Leader *Gary Porter as recounted by the defeated Friedrich von Gröthausen:

'Twas the night after Christmas, when through Trenton Town
Not a soldier was stirring, not even Corporal Baum;
The muskets were stacked by the doorway with care,
In case General Washington dared to come there;
The grenadiers were nestled, all warm in their beds;
While visions of lebkuechen danced in their heads;
Colonel Rall in his kerchief, and I, Lt. Friedrich von
Gröthausen, in my cap,
Had just settled down for a long winter's nap.

When out on the outskirts there arose such a clatter,
I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter.

Away to the window I flew like a flash,
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.

The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow,
Gave a lustre of midday to cannon below.

When what to my wondering eyes did appear,
But an army of Continentals and eight ..enormous field guns,
(must everything rhyme?) With a tall, poised Commander, erect
on his horse,
I knew in a moment 'twas the General, of course.

More rapid than eagles his forces they came,
And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name:
Now Mercer, now Moulder, now Morris and Tilghman!
On Haslet, on Johnson, on Chester and Gilman!
To the top of the hill! to the top of the wall!
Now fire away! fire away! fire away all!"
As smoke from their guns drifted up to the sky,
I wondered whether kegs of our powder had stayed dry.

Up at King Street end, Washington's force
Gave us volley upon volley, on foot and on horse.

And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the street,
Prancing and pawing, dragoons beating feet.

As I drew in my head, and was turning around,
In the doorway, General Washington came with a bound.

He was dressed blue and buff, from his head to his foot,
Shoe buckles tarnished by powder and soot;
A gleaming long sword hung by his side,
And he looked, well, like a soldier, all beaming with pride.

His eyes—how they twinkled! his dimples, how merry!
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!
His firm little mouth was drawn up like a bow,
And the hair of his wig was as white as the snow;
The sword at his side now came out of its sheath,
He circled it high, ... and knocked down a wreath;
He had a firm face and a slightly round belly

That looked like it held some of Martha's grape jelly.

He was tall and commanding, a distinguished old skate,
And I laughed, ... then I cried, ... as I considered my fate;
A wink of his eye and a twist of his head,
Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread;
He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,
Emptied our wardrobes; then turned with a jerk,
And laying his finger aside of his nose,
And giving a nod, out the doorway he goes;
He sprang to his horse, to his guards gave a whistle,
And away they all flew with a final dismissal.
But I heard him exclaim, so as not to confuse –

“Happy Christmas to you, von Gröthausen, but my men need these shoes.”

The present delivered that morning in Trenton has continued to bless Americans every Christmas. Let's not forget in all the festivities to pass the knowledge of this gift to our future generations.

* Mr. Porter is Executive Director of the Constitution Leadership Initiative, a project to encourage a better understanding of the U.S. Constitution and other Founding documents among the American people.

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