



Day 25 American Revolution

A New Hope: Trenton and Princeton

A New Hope: Trenton and Princeton — Moral Victories and Leadership

Time: 60–75 minutes

Grade Range: Upper elementary–middle school

Unit: American Revolution

Lesson Overview

This lesson explores how the Battles of Trenton and Princeton revived the American Revolution at its lowest point. Using a teacher-led PowerPoint as the anchor, students analyze George Washington's leadership, the role of morale in warfare, and the concept of a "moral victory." Students then deepen understanding through an article reading, a reflective writing task, and creative or comprehension-based culminating activities.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Describe the events leading up to the Battle of Trenton
- Explain why Trenton was more a moral victory than a tactical one
- Analyze how leadership and morale influence historical outcomes
- Apply historical concepts through reflective and creative tasks

Materials

- **PowerPoint: A New Hope: Trenton and Princeton** (anchor)
- Online article: **The Battle of Trenton**
- Writing prompt: **Moral Victories**
- Reading comprehension exercises
- Image activity: *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (Leutze, 1851)

Hook (5–7 minutes): When Victory Isn’t About Winning Big

Begin with a brief discussion:

- Have you ever “lost,” but still felt successful?
- Can something be important even if it doesn’t change everything right away?

Explain that today’s lesson focuses on a moment when the American Revolution was saved—not by a massive victory, but by **hope, morale, and leadership**.

Anchor Activity

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/revwar/trenton.pptx>

PowerPoint Presentation: A New Hope: Trenton and Princeton

Time: 25–30 minutes

Below is a **slide-by-slide teacher script**.

Slide 1 – A New Hope: Trenton and Princeton

Teacher Script:

“By the end of 1776, the American Revolution was close to collapse. Today we’ll see how two winter victories gave the Patriots something they desperately needed—hope.”

Slide 2 – 1776: A Brutal Year

Teacher Script:

“Most of 1776 had gone terribly for the Patriots. After heavy defeats in New York, Washington’s army was exhausted, outnumbered, and retreating.”

Slide 3 – Retreat to the Delaware

Teacher Script:

“The Continental Army retreated across New Jersey and crossed the Delaware River into Pennsylvania. Many believed the Revolution was almost over.”

Slide 4 – The Hessians at Trenton

Teacher Script:

“Hessian soldiers—German mercenaries—were stationed at Trenton. They believed the Americans were beaten and were not expecting an attack.”

Slide 5 – Washington’s Bold Plan

Teacher Script:

“Washington knew he needed a victory—any victory—to save the army. He planned a surprise attack on Trenton for December 26, 1776.”

Slide 6 – Crossing the Delaware

Teacher Script:

“The crossing was dangerous. Ice, snow, and freezing rain slowed the army. Yet Washington pressed on, knowing failure meant disaster.”

Slide 7 – A Nine-Mile March

Teacher Script:

“After crossing, the army marched nine miles in brutal winter conditions. Many soldiers lacked shoes and left blood in the snow.”

Slide 8 – First Shots

Teacher Script:

“The battle began at a Hessian outpost north of Trenton. The surprise worked—the Hessians were caught completely off guard.”

Slide 9 – Battle of Trenton**Teacher Script:**

“American cannons were placed on Trenton’s main streets. The Hessians were surrounded, confused, and quickly overwhelmed.”

Slide 10 – Results at Trenton**Teacher Script:**

“Only two Americans were killed, while nearly 900 Hessians were captured. It was a shocking result after months of defeat.”

Slide 11 – A Boost to Patriot Morale**Teacher Script:**

“This victory mattered less for what was gained and more for what it restored—confidence. Soldiers reenlisted, and Americans believed again.”

Slide 12 – Cornwallis Responds**Teacher Script:**

“The British sent General Cornwallis to crush Washington. He believed Washington would retreat the same way again.”

Slide 13 – Washington’s Night Escape**Teacher Script:**

“Instead, Washington fooled the British. Campfires burned while the army quietly slipped away under cover of darkness.”

Slide 14 – Battle of Princeton

Teacher Script:

“Washington struck again at Princeton. Leading from the front, he helped break British lines and forced a retreat.”

Slide 15 – Why Trenton and Princeton Mattered**Teacher Script:**

“These victories didn’t end the war—but they saved it. Washington proved that leadership, timing, and morale could change everything.”

Article Integration: The Battle of Trenton (10–15 minutes)

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/revolutionary-war/battles-of-the-revolutionary-war/the-battle-of-trenton>

Students now read the **online article on the Battle of Trenton** (teacher-read, independent, or partner reading).

Focus Questions:

- Why was Washington desperate for a victory?
- What risks did he take at Trenton?
- Why do historians call Trenton a “moral victory”?

Writing Activity: Moral Victories (15–20 minutes)

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/revolutionary-war/revolutionary-war-writing-activities/the-battle-of-trenton-a-moral-victory>

Writing Prompt

Following the disastrous battles in and around New York, George Washington desperately needed a military achievement before the end of 1776. His daring victory at Trenton did not destroy the British army, but it restored confidence and saved the Patriot cause.

Student Task:

- Explain why Trenton is considered a **moral victory**

- Then describe a **moral victory from your own life**, or one you've seen in sports, books, movies, or history
- Explain what was learned or gained, even if the outcome wasn't a complete win

Encourage reflection, clarity, and connection to Washington's experience.

Culminating Options (Choose One)

Option 1: Reading Comprehension Exercises

Students complete comprehension activities focused on:

- Cause and effect
- Morale vs. military power
- Leadership decisions

[Battle of Trenton Printable Reading Comprehension](#) - Lexile 1000

[Battle of Trenton Printable Reading Comprehension](#) - Lexile 800

[Battle of Trenton Online Reading Comprehension](#) - Lexile 1000

[The Hessians Printable Reading Comprehension](#) - Lexile 900

[The Hessians Printable Reading Comprehension](#) - Lexile 800

[The Hessians Online Reading Comprehension](#) - Lexile 900

Option 2: Art & Perspective Activity — *Washington Crossing the Delaware*

Students examine Emanuel Leutze's 1851 painting.

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/revolutionary-war/fun-printables-of-the-revolutionary-war/what-were-they-thinking-crossing-the-delaware-river>

Prompt:

One little-known fact about the painting is that a wounded James Monroe is holding the flag behind Washington.

Student Task:

- Fill in the thought bubbles or blurbs for:
 - George Washington
 - Three soldiers in the boat
- Consider:
 - Fear
 - Cold
 - Hope
 - Determination
- Humor is encouraged
- Students may color the image

Closure (5 minutes)

Return to the opening idea:

- Can a victory matter even if it doesn't change everything immediately?
- How did Washington's leadership keep the Revolution alive?

Reinforce that **Trenton and Princeton prove that hope and morale can be just as powerful as armies.**