

Re-enactors mark Battle of Princeton as turning point in history

by [Tom Hester](#)/The Star-Ledger

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Jim Pathe/The Star-Ledger

John Mills and Jerry Hurwitz are historians with a scholar's knowledge of the Jan. 3, 1777, Battle of Princeton.

Mills, the historian for Princeton Battlefield State Park, and Hurwitz, president of the Princeton Battlefield Society, recently stood on high ground overlooking the 75 sweeping acres that remain of the battlefield.

Before them, patches of ice splotted the yellow grass just as they did on that "bright, serene, and extremely cold morning," as an American lieutenant described it nearly 232 years ago, when Gen. George Washington and his cold and battle-weary volunteers defeated British regulars in a turning point of the American Revolution.



Jerry Hurwitz, president of the Princeton Battlefield Society, pointing to the area where the 1777 battle is believed to have taken place.

The victory climaxed a military campaign known as the Ten Crucial Days, which began with Washington's historic crossing of the Delaware River on Christmas Night 1776 and the stunning victory over the Hessians at Trenton. The Battle of Princeton marked the first time Washington defeated British regulars and the first time U.S. Marines fought and died in battle.

Those crucial days are the focus of the annual re-enactment of Washington and his troops crossing the Delaware at 1 p.m. on Christmas Day at Washington Crossing State Park in Hopewell Township, and the annual Patriots' Week in Trenton where more than 40 events will be held between Friday and Dec. 31.

Mills, the battlefield historian since 1985, pointed out landmarks on the field -- where the British hurried in from the North, where the Americans came in from the South, where cannons were placed, where the British charged and where Washington rallied his men.

Mills and Hurwitz have a deep appreciation of the battlefield and said they wish New Jerseyans had a

better understanding of its significant place in American history.

"It was one of the turning points of the Revolution," Hurwitz said. "Trenton and Princeton are like bookends in the 'Ten Crucial Days.'

"It altered American history and took us from the depths of defeat. There was a rebirth. The leadership of Washington was never more highlighted. Not only did he make the audacious attack on Trenton, he had the British in front of him and marched around their flank to attack them at Princeton. That was exceedingly dangerous and daring," he added.

Mills said groups of U.S. military officers frequently tour the battlefield to study Washington's strategy.

It was late on the night of Jan. 2, 1777, as the temperature dropped in the teeth of a biting northwest wind, when Washington decided to take advantage of what he described as a "providential change in the weather." He used the frozen roads to lead about 4,400 of his troops on a desperate march around the east flank of an 8,000-man British army that thought it had him trapped at Trenton.

To mask the movement, Washington left 400 troops around burning campfires. The wheels of the cannons and the hoofs of the horses were wrapped in rags to muffle their noises, and commands were passed in whispers.

After a 13-mile march that took them as far east as Allentown, dawn found Washington and his exhausted troops on the edge of Princeton.

Minutes later, the Americans collided with up to 500 British marching South on what is now Route 206 to support Gen. Charles Cornwallis at Trenton.

Both armies scrambled for the best positions on the barren fields of Quakers Thomas and William Clarke's farms.

Gen. Hugh Mercer's Americans fired three volleys at a distance of 40 yards before fleeing for their lives before a merciless British bayonet charge.

The battle was turning into a rout when Washington appeared on a white charger with reinforcements. "Parade with us my brave fellows," he shouted at the retreating troops. "There is but a handful of the enemy and we will have them directly."

As many as 5,000 people, mainly school children, visit the Thomas Clarke House Museum annually to see the collection of muskets, cannonballs and artifacts. Another 70,000 others use the battleground for picnicking, jogging, hiking, horseback riding and even an occasional wedding.

"For students of history, they certainly do appreciate the site," Mills said. "But people in the area recognize it as recreation."

Mills said he would like to see a visitor's center built to house the artifact collection and funds allotted to conduct a ground radar survey of the west portion of the battlefield to find the unmarked grave site of as many as 50 American and British dead.

The Battlefield Society is fighting a proposal by the Institute of Advanced Study to erect faculty housing on 22 acres of the battlefield it owns on the north side of the park. It is also preparing to use a \$31,000 federal American Battlefield Protection grant to study the landscape and create a map that would pinpoint troop movements and where buildings and fences stood.

A copy of the map would be displayed at a new information stand overlooking the battlefield. The map stand placed there in 1964 fell apart piece by piece in recent years and only its crumbling bricks remain.

For information about Princeton Battlefield, call 609-921-0074.