

# TEN Crucial Days

*THE ROAD TO LIBERTY*

Lesson Plans Developed by  
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To accompany NJN Public Television's Documentary  
*Ten Crucial Days: The Road to Liberty*



Public Television

## George Washington as Hero Figure

**Grade Level:** 3-5 *United States History*

**Time Needed:** Two 40-minute periods

**Objectives:** Students will be able to:

1. define for themselves the term hero.
2. explain how or if Washington's actions during the planning and execution of the Battles of Trenton and Princeton exemplified "heroic" qualities.

**NJCCC Standards Grades 4-8:**

**6.2.1.** Recognize human experiences through time, as depicted in works of history, literature and the fine arts.

**6.3.1.** Apply the concepts of cause, effect and consequences to historical events.

**6.3.3.** Identify and explain how events and changes occurred in significant historical periods.

**Background:**

It has certainly become a cliché that George Washington was a hero of the American Revolution. But, having said that, we need to consider what that actually means. This is especially true today, when the term hero is used very freely to describe everything from a person who fearlessly risks his/her own life to save the lives of others to just a very big sandwich.

Perhaps we need to agree on a definition of what a hero is. Here are some suggested definitions:

Adapted from Webster's Dictionary:

- 1: a mythological or legendary figure, often of divine descent, endowed with great strength or ability b: an illustrious warrior c: a man admired for his achievements and noble qualities d: one who shows great courage
- 2: the principal male character in a literary or dramatic work b: the central figure in an event, period, or movement
- 3: an object of extreme admiration and devotion: [Idol](#)

Does Washington, in the Battles of Trenton and Princeton, live up to these definitions? We can apply the definitions to Washington more easily by breaking them down into individual points:

1. Faced danger and adversity
2. The odds were against him/her (the "underdog" factor).
3. Displayed courage
4. Showed self-sacrifice, including putting his/her life at risk for other

5. Motivated by a drive to achieve a “greater good” or nobility of purpose, not just narrow self-interest
6. Showed great military skill
7. Served as role model for others
8. Displayed physical and/or moral strength
9. Received praise or fame for his/her actions
10. Central figure in an event

In the course of these events, the video *Ten Crucial Days: The Road to Liberty* demonstrates how Washington exhibited many, if not all of the 10 characteristics mentioned in the definitions of a hero. After successfully forcing the British, under General Sir William Howe, to evacuate Boston, Washington had moved his army south to prevent the British from occupying the port of New York, which seemed like their most logical next move. When Howe’s forces did arrive in New York, Washington’s army, now numbering about 35,000 men, put up strong resistance but could not stop the reinforced British army and fleet from capturing the city. Washington initiated a strategic retreat across New York and New Jersey, engaging the British when he could, but never allowing his forces to be cornered. He recognized that the Revolution was alive as long as he still had an army at large to fight it, and preserving that army became a major part of his strategy.

By the fall and early winter of 1776, Washington’s army, shrunken by casualties, illness, and expired enlistments, was on the run. The British army had driven them across New Jersey and they had escaped across the Delaware River in Pennsylvania to lick their wounds. General Howe was confident that there would be no more fighting through the rest of the winter, believing that Washington’s army was severely weakened (which it was) and posed no threat to British control of New York and New Jersey. He left small groups of soldiers in a number of central New Jersey towns to monitor Washington, and stationed the bulk of the British force in the relative comfort of New York City for the rest of the winter. It should be remembered that armies in those days seldom fought during the winter. Military leaders generally found winter fighting conditions much too difficult to make it worthwhile. Though Howe was a loyal British soldier, he had long been a critic of British policy toward the colonies, and he was sympathetic to the colonists. He was hopeful of working out a diplomatic solution to the conflict.

By early December, Washington’s position was becoming quite desperate. He faced many problems: The enlistment terms of many of his soldiers were running out on January 1, he was low on funds and supplies, and he was facing one of the harshest winters of the late 18th century. With an army numbering only about 3,000 men, he reached the conclusion that without some change—some dramatic turnaround—his army could only last about ten more days. Washington needed to make a bold move to give the Continental army some kind of edge.

He decided on a totally unexpected and exceedingly risky course of action. He would do the last thing the British would expect him to do—launch a surprise attack in the worst weather of the winter when the enemy’s guard might be down. The plan was to attack the town of Trenton, which was garrisoned by about 1,500 Hessian troops during the night of December 25, the Christmas holiday. He took 2,400 of his men, who were fit for active duty at that time, and crossed the Delaware River. They marched along icy, snow-covered dirt roads with cannons and horses, and made it to Trenton undetected by the Hessians. The weather at that point was so severe that two of Washington’s men

died of hypothermia along the way.

The attack was a success. The Hessian troops were caught by surprise, fought well, but were overcome by Washington's superior numbers and shrewd tactics. Twenty-two of the Hessians were killed and about 900 were taken prisoner. The remainder retreated to Princeton. Washington took control of the prisoners and their supplies and returned to Pennsylvania. Word of this surprise victory spread quickly and galvanized the Patriot cause.

When General Howe learned about the surprise battle, he sent General Charles Cornwallis to Princeton with reinforcements. A few days later, Washington came back and reoccupied Trenton. Cornwallis led his troops from Princeton to attack Washington's forces. Washington split his force, leaving a small group around Trenton. During the night, he had the troops left behind keep a large number of campfires burning in Trenton to give the impression that his entire force was there. Meanwhile, using information about a back road to Princeton that the British were unaware of, Washington moved most of his troops toward Princeton and was able to outflank the advancing units of the British. Washington attacked them from the side and the rear as they advanced down the road. Fighting also took place on an adjacent farm. The battle raged for some time, and Washington was seen by all courageously leading a crucial attack against the British, conspicuous on his white horse and an easy target for British muskets. Many of his officers were sure he would be killed. Fortunately for the Revolution, he survived, and the battle was a victory for the Continental army. The British withdrew, scaled back their occupation of Central Jersey to two towns, Perth Amboy and New Brunswick, and once again went into winter quarters.

The Patriot victories at Trenton and Princeton shifted the momentum of the war. Suddenly, the Americans believed the war could, in fact, be won. Support among the colonists for the cause of independence grew, reviving their belief in victory and independence. The British, meanwhile, were forced to acknowledge that the colonists were not as worn down as they had believed and that the war would take longer than previously thought. Public opinion in England, which had always been divided about colonial policy, became even more divided over the war. The British public soon grew impatient for the war to end. Even though these victories, as battles went, were small-scale ones, the psychological effect was immense. Washington had established himself as a bold, courageous leader, not just a master of the strategic retreat. He was now also viewed as a true heroic figure, who personified the Revolution in the minds and imaginations of the American rebels.

**Procedures:**

Day 1:

- a. Anticipatory Set: Have the students write one or two sentences defining the word hero.
- b. As a class, discuss the students' idea of what constitutes a hero and review the definitions provided in the Background section of this lesson plan.
- c. The teacher should list on the board or on an overhead the characteristics of a hero, as discussed in class and as listed in the Background section.
- d. Lesson Procedure: Have students watch the NJN video *Ten Crucial Days: The Road to Liberty*, focusing on the actions of George Washington.
- e. Provide the students with a copy of the 10 Hero Characteristics.

- f. Break into groups of three and, using a checklist of characteristics of a hero, have them mark which ones applied to Washington, as shown in the video.
- g. Lead a class discussion, trying to establish whether Washington was heroic and, if he was, what value that had to the cause of the Revolution at the time.

Day 2:

- a. Provide the instructions for the Hero Hall of Fame project.
  - i. In order for a person to be inducted into the Hero Hall of Fame, he or she must fulfill certain requirements and have certain qualifications.
  - ii. For this project, students should agree on which qualifications and characteristics each “hero” must exemplify.
    1. In developing their own Hero Hall of Fame checklist, students should use as a springboard the list shown in class.
  - iii. Have students select a current public figure and, using the list of heroic characteristics developed by the class, determine whether that person qualifies as a hero or not.
  - iv. Ask students to create a poster to nominate their candidate to be inducted into the Hero Hall of Fame.
    1. Students may use pictures, drawings, and creatively state how this candidate has met the qualifications.
  - v. Once the posters are complete, students will present their candidate’s poster to the class.
  - vi. The class will vote on whether each candidate should or shouldn’t be inducted into the Hero Hall of Fame, based on the checklist of qualifications rather than their personal likes or dislikes of the person in question.

**Homework:**

Students will continue to work on their Hero Hall of Fame candidate’s nomination poster.

**Assessment:**

- Evaluate the students’ effort in providing supporting evidence to qualify Washington as a hero during the Revolutionary War.
- Assess the level of understanding of the characteristics of a hero and the effect on society of heroes, as students work with these concepts in class discussion and in the homework assignment.

**Characteristics of a Hero Worksheet**

A person considered to be a hero exhibits many of the following qualities. Review each characteristic. Place a check mark in the left column if you believe that the statement describes George Washington as the commander-in-chief of the Continental forces in the Battles of Trenton and Princeton.

<input type="checkbox"/>	Faced danger and hardship
<input type="checkbox"/>	Position of weakness (“underdog” factor)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Showed courage
<input type="checkbox"/>	Showed selflessness, including putting his/her life at risk.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Put the good of the community above oneself.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Showed military or moral excellence
<input type="checkbox"/>	Served as role model for others, especially children
<input type="checkbox"/>	Showed physical and/or moral strength
<input type="checkbox"/>	Received praise or fame for his/her actions.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Main figure in an event

**Hero Hall of Fame Checklist**

- How would you define a hero? List the qualifications each candidate must have in order to be considered for the Hero Hall of Fame.
- Use this checklist to carefully choose who you want to nominate for the Hero Hall of Fame.
- This checklist can also be used during the presentations of the nominees, and when it comes time to vote for or against their induction.


**Links:**

Hessian Barracks:

<http://www.barracks.org/>

Battle of Trenton:

[http://www.theamericanrevolution.org/battles/bat\\_tren.asp](http://www.theamericanrevolution.org/battles/bat_tren.asp)

<http://www.patriotresource.com/battles/trenton.html>

<http://www.myrevolutionarywar.com/battles/761226.htm>

[http://www.pbs.org/ktca/liberty/chronicle\\_trenton1776.html](http://www.pbs.org/ktca/liberty/chronicle_trenton1776.html)

Battle of Princeton:

<http://www.patriotresource.com/battles/princeton.html>

<http://www.myrevolutionarywar.com/battles/770103.htm>

<http://virtualology.com/revolutionarywarhall/BATTLEOFPRINCETON.COM/>

Revolutionary War in New Jersey

<http://www.doublegv.com/ggv/NJrev.html>

[http://mapmaker.rutgers.edu/HISTORICALMAPS/REVOLUTIONARYWAR/Revolutionary\\_War.html](http://mapmaker.rutgers.edu/HISTORICALMAPS/REVOLUTIONARYWAR/Revolutionary_War.html)

<http://www.njskylands.com/hsAmRev225.htm>