

**THE BATTLE OF  
PRINCETON: A  
PRELIMINARY STUDY**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649753185

The Battle of Princeton: A Preliminary Study by Alfred A. Woodhull

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

[www.triestepublishing.com](http://www.triestepublishing.com)

**ALFRED A. WOODHULL**

**THE BATTLE OF  
PRINCETON: A  
PRELIMINARY STUDY**



# The Battle of Princeton

A Preliminary Study

---

BY

ALFRED A. WOODHULL

---

PRINCETON, N. J.

W. C. SINCLAIR

1913

*To*

THE SOCIETY OF SONS OF THE REVOLUTION IN NEW JERSEY

## NOTE.

The object of this essay is to describe the tactical operations in the engagement near Princeton, on the third of January, 1777. It is a study preliminary to a fuller discussion of that short Jersey campaign; and it is put forth in this form and at this time expressly to elicit and invite criticism and, if possible, to draw out authorities, published or still in manuscript, that may throw more light on the situation.

Princeton was not a great battle from the point of numbers engaged or of casualties suffered. But it was a great battle when its consequences are considered; when the influence of that victory upon the military history of the Revolution is weighed; and especially when one reflects upon the inevitable political result that would have followed a defeat upon that field.

No one can write of these movements without recognizing the importance of the late General W. S. Stryker's investigation of the subject, and feeling serious obligation to him, an obligation that I gratefully express. I am glad also to acknowledge indebtedness for cordial coöperation and very intelligent comment to my friend Walter Hart Olden, whose family has lived in the neighborhood since 1696. Mr. Olden has freely placed at my disposal farm maps, field notes of old surveys, and neighborhood traditions which have been exceedingly valuable.

A. A. W.

PRINCETON,  
February 12th, 1913.

# The Battle of Princeton

## A Preliminary Study

The military situation on the evening of the second of January, 1777, which led to the engagement near Princeton the next day, was this: Lord Cornwallis with a considerable force had reached Princeton on the first, and proceeded toward Trenton on the second, of January. He took with him von Donop's brigade of Hessians, that had been in Princeton since December twenty-eighth, and left in that village a British brigade temporarily commanded by Lt. Col. Mawhood. Of this brigade, the 17th and 55th Foot were to follow the next morning, and the 40th, quartered in the college, was to remain there in garrison. He also left Leslie's brigade for the time at Maidenhead (Lawrenceville). The only direct route to Trenton was the Post Road, which crossed Stony Brook by a bridge at Worth's Mill and ran through Lawrenceville. Cornwallis was delayed by a detaining force beyond Lawrenceville, and did not reach Trenton until nearly sunset, or between four and five o'clock. The weather was warm and oppressive for the season; it had rained, the road was deep with mud, and the smaller streams were running nearly, or quite, bank-full under the influence of the thaw. The British column was about 8,000 strong and it immediately made an ineffectual attempt to cross the Assunpink, a small stream, whose left bank the Americans held, that enters the Delaware after bounding Trenton on the southeast.

Washington had with him a few small Continental regiments, and a considerable number of militia drawn from Philadelphia and South Jersey, the total being about four thousand men, imperfectly equipped and clothed. For reasons not necessary to rehearse here, it was imperative that the Americans should leave the British vicinity in the course of the night; and providentially for this movement a sudden



and severe change in the weather made the roads, that were almost bottomless, rough but adamantine tracks. Accordingly about one o'clock in the morning, after what heavy baggage there was had been sent toward Burlington, the troops were adroitly and silently withdrawn from the line of the Assumpink and set in motion for the Quaker Bridge on the upper reaches of that creek. This bridge was on the Quaker Road, the travelled route between the Friends' Meetings of Stony Brook and Crosswicks. Between Trenton and the bridge were merely country ways, difficult for wheeled transportation, narrow, rough, irregular, obstructed by stumps, cut into ruts, and used only for short sections of neighborhood communication and not for travel to Princeton or New Brunswick. North of the Quaker Bridge the road was comparatively direct and plain, but still very inferior and not a highway in any proper sense.

Washington's purpose was a double one; to evacuate his absolutely untenable position, and to surprise the minor post of Princeton and possibly seize the military depot at New Brunswick. Not long before sunrise he passed Stony Brook at the point where the bridge near the canal now spans it, about a third of a mile from Port Mercer, since established, and a very little more than a mile south of the Meeting House, still standing. After crossing, he divided the command into three columns.<sup>1</sup> One, the First Division, under Maj. Gen. Sullivan, was to move by the right to Princeton and approach it on the reverse, or south, side. Sullivan left the Quaker Road about 500 yards from the Meeting House, passed behind (south of) a thick wood, apparently made use of cleared fields for easier progress, and inclined to the left so as to enter the way used by Friends from Princeton going across country to Meeting, as they sometimes did in preference to taking the longer route by the formal highway. Certainly, when Mercer be-

<sup>1</sup>Rodney, *Memoirs Long Island Historical Society*, Vol. III., Part II., pp. 158-9; also Stryker, *Battles of Trenton and Princeton*, p. 438.

came engaged he was on one of the Clarkes' farms, but not immediately at the southern base of the ridge on which the house stands. Two brigades, forming the Second Division, were to move to the left and enter the village from the west, but on the way to break the wooden bridge over Stony Brook at Worth's Mill on the main road, and to post a party there to delay any force that might arrive in pursuit. Brig. Gen. Mercer, with the Third Division, also of two brigades, was "to march straight on to Princeton, without turning to the right or left." The commander of the Second Division who was to break the bridge, leave a rear-guard there, and proceed to Princeton, has not yet been identified; but it is believed that he was Maj. Gen. Greene. Had he broken the bridge, obviously his course toward the town would have been over the Post Road. It clearly was Washington's design to mark out a military triangle with a comparatively narrow base. (Sullivan left the road about three-fourths of a mile from the Mill,) the two sides, Sullivan's and, as we suppose, Greene's, columns, converging at the apex, Princeton. The triangle was bisected by Mercer's column moving midway between the others to unite with them finally at the critical position. This was a modification, conforming to the topographical situation, of the attack on Trenton eight days earlier. It had the advantage of using three lines of march, thus shortening by one-third the long drawn-out and slender formation in which the army had moved from Trenton, and of keeping the three columns within supporting distance of each other. But as a matter of fact no Americans reached the bridge before the battle, although the interruption of hostile communication by its destruction would have been eminently desirable. Inasmuch as no further mention is made of the column sent to the left, and as Greene, who would have been its natural commander, is known to have been in the culminating fight, we are required to assume: Either (1) that Rodney was mistaken and such a Division was not sent; or (2) that it was recalled soon after it had started; or (3) that its commander observed

Mawhood's movement and promptly and properly retraced his steps so as to rejoin Washington and thus reinforce Sullivan's First Division. In either case Mercer's Third Division became simply a flanking column to the main body and would serve as a first line of battle if attacked from the left, as proved the case. In that view, had time allowed, Mercer should have retired, skirmishing, on the main body. But the contact between the two columns was not effective, and certainly no warning was sent from the rear after Mawhood's approach was observed.

It now is necessary to examine the British situation. Lt. Col. Mawhood, who had been left at Princeton over night with orders to proceed early the next morning to Trenton with a part of his brigade, drew out in the short dawn twilight and as the sun rose was ascending the hill immediately beyond Worth's Mill. He had with him the 17th Foot, a small part of the 55th Foot, a troop<sup>2</sup> of the 16th Light Dragoons, and two pieces of artillery. The greater part of the 55th, under the command of Major Cornelius Cuyler, was nearly, or quite, a mile in the rear. When near the house on the summit, then belonging to William Millette, but whose site is now that of Mrs. Schirmer's, chance observation toward the east disclosed a distant body of American troops and the commanding officer, assuming that these were fugitives from Trenton, immediately countermarched with the view of cutting them off. It is not certainly known which Division he discovered. Wilkinson, then an aide to St. Clair, while near the head of Sullivan's First Division, saw the British in the act of countermarching and believed that it was St. Clair's own troops that had been observed.<sup>3</sup> The morning was cold and clear and, when the woods did not intercept the view, moving objects could be detected at a long distance. It seems probable that a

<sup>2</sup> Wilkinson. *Memoirs*, I., p. 144, says "three troops."

<sup>3</sup> *Memoirs* (1816) I., p. 141.