

This Day in History... August 27, 1776

Battle of Brooklyn

The Continental and British armies engaged in their first fight of the Revolutionary War on August 27, 1776. The Battle of Brooklyn (also known as the Battle of Long Island or the Battle of Brooklyn Heights) was the largest battle of the war.

In early 1776, the British evacuated Boston, heading to Nova Scotia to wait for reinforcements. In the meantime, General George Washington began sending troops to New York City, which he believed would be the next major battle ground for its strategic importance.

In February, Washington sent his second in command, Charles Lee, to prepare the city's defenses. Washington himself arrived in New York on April 13 and established his headquarters on Broadway. By May, Washington had a number of forts under construction and directed the creation of a mounted battery on Governors Island. He had around 19,000 troops total (only about 10,000 in Brooklyn), even though Congress authorized him to form an army up to 28,501 strong. His men were largely untrained (unlike the British) and came from different colonies, with different authorities, regulations, and equipment.



Commemorates Sullivan's Expedition against the Iroquois during the war.

On June 28, Washington received word that the British had left Nova Scotia weeks earlier, bound for New York. The following day, some 45 British ships arrived in Lower New York Bay. Eighty-five more ships arrived over the next week. Watching the arrival of the British ships, New Yorkers began to panic while troops rushed to their posts. Some fired a few shots at the British while others lost their courage and flocked to the British side.

On July 9, the Declaration of Independence was read aloud for the city's troops and residents. They then rushed to the equestrian statue of George III, cut off its head, put it on a spike and sent the rest of the statue to be melted down for musket balls.

In the meantime, a few British ships sailed up the Hudson to Tarrytown to cut off American supply lines and gain loyalist support. British General Howe tried several times to meet with Washington to open negotiations. At one point he offered pardons, to which Washington replied, "Those who have committed no fault want no pardon," earning him praise throughout the colonies.

As more and more British continued to arrive, Washington was unsure where the battle would take place. Nathanael Green and Joseph Reed believed they would attack Long Island, while Washington believed that Long Island might be a diversion for the main attack on Manhattan. Unsure, Washington split his army in half, sending some to Long Island under Greene's command and some to Manhattan. (When Greene fell ill, John Sullivan took his place but was then sent to Guan Heights, leaving Israel Putnam in command.)

In the early hours of August 22, some 4,000 British troops landed on Long Island, sending the defending Pennsylvania riflemen into a retreat. Another 11,000 British landed by noon and then pushed six miles inland to Flatbush where they set up camp. Washington received word of the landings, but only that there were 8,000 or 9,000 troops, leading him to believe his theory of the attack was correct. The British then received 5,000 Hessian reinforcements, giving them a total force of 20,000, double the 10,000 Washington had.

The British learned from loyalists that the Americans hadn't set up significant defenses at Jamaica Pass. So they decided to launch a small attack on the American front as a diversion, while a larger force attacked from the rear. The British set out on the night of August 26, leaving their campfires burning to keep the Americans thinking they were still in camp. By dawn, the British made their way through Jamaica Pass, capturing the five American militia officers stationed there.

At 9:00 a.m. on August 27, the British in the rear fired two cannons to let the Hessians know to begin their front assault. At the same time, this rear force began attacking the American flank. Fighting immediately broke out all over, with particularly brutal fighting at Battle Hill. It was here that American troops inflicted the greatest number of British casualties. At Battle Pass, John Sullivan's troops were attacked from the front and the back, at this point still unclear where the main threat was coming from. As the casualties rose on both sides, men began to flee, but Sullivan led his men in hand-to-hand combat before retreating to Brooklyn Heights, though he was captured. (Sullivan was later allowed to go free on the condition that he propose a peace conference to the Continental Congress. However, the conference didn't accomplish anything.)

In one notable instance, a Maryland regiment of about 260 men fiercely attacked a well-defended British outpost. All but nine died. Watching from nearby, Washington said, "Good God, what brave fellows I must this day lose." However, their valiant efforts bought Washington the time to gather his remaining troops for a retreat across the East River.



Pictures Washington, Nathanael Greene, and Mount Vernon.

By the time all the surviving American troops were safely behind the fortified position at Brooklyn Heights, the British commander made the controversial move of halting the attack. He decided to set up a siege and encircle the American position. Washington and his advisors soon realized that evacuation was their only option and began sending troops quietly to Manhattan. In fact, they managed to evacuate all 9,000 troops without a single life lost.

The British forces were stunned to find the Americans had evacuated without them knowing, but quickly took over their fortifications. In England, people celebrated the victory. The American loss revealed weaknesses in Washington's strategy and the young American military. But his stealthy nighttime retreat is often seen as one of his greatest military accomplishments.

The Americans remained in New York for a few more months, but following losses at White Plains and Fort Mifflin, they retreated across New Jersey and into Pennsylvania. British soldiers occupied Brooklyn until 1783.



1951 stamp picturing Washington evacuating his troops.



This was the highest-denominated stamp at the time.

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