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Re-enactment mirrors life at 1776 Mount Holly battle

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Hundreds of people learned about the pivotal Battle of Iron Works Hill, part of the Revolutionary War, on the streets of Mount Holly Saturday.

Nearly 100 re-enactors took to the streets to recreate a 1776 battle that was critical to George Washington's crossing of the Delaware River and his subsequent victory at the Battle of Trenton.

"Everybody knows that Washington crossed the Delaware and beat the Hessians, they just don't know how," said Carl Szathmary, the Roebing resident who played the part of Col. Samuel Griffin, who commanded the American force of roughly 600. "They don't teach this stuff in school. We do this so people can understand that there's a lot of history here."

Griffin's force lured the Crown troops to Mount Holly intentionally from posts in Bordentown and harassed Crown troops in Mansfield at a skirmish at Petticoat Bridge in order to divert them from Trenton. That allowed Washington with his roughly 1,200 plus troops to surprise a Crown force of 1,800 in Trenton on Dec. 25 and defeat them.

"I don't know how many forces they had in Bordentown, but it was enough that it could have turned the battle in Trenton," Szathmary said.

"What happened here was very important because it prevented re-enforcements from reaching Trenton," added Paul Loane, of Mount Holly, commander of the 43rd Regiment of Foot.

Members of the 43rd Regiment played the part of the Crown forces on Saturday, which assembled in front of the Old Prison Museum on High Street.

While waiting for the battle to start, re-enactors showed the crowd some 18th-century medical techniques and demonstrated how Crown soldiers loaded their muskets.

Just as in the real battle, the Crown forces greatly outnumbered the American forces, which gathered at Mill Race Village.

At the American encampment, visitors could see how soldiers lived while on the move.

At about 3 p.m., the two groups moved toward each other firing their muskets.

Children covered their ears as the loud boom of cannon fire reverberated through the downtown streets.

"What this is, is a demonstration of 18th century tactic, not a recreation of the battle that happened here," Loane said. "It's to educate the public and call attention to this very important historical area."

In the actual battle, which took place on Dec. 23 and 24 of 1776, about 2,200 Hessians and Scots

allied with the British Crown sat atop the mount along High Street while Colonial Continental and militia forces were entrenched on Iron Works Hill, now a cemetery on Pine Street.

It was a cannon battle, with both groups firing at each other until Griffin heard cannon fire coming from Trenton and retreated, having successfully kept the Crown troops occupied.

"These guys were also veterans," said Szathmary. "These were the first people that died for our freedom and they need to be recognized too."

Christine Tournier, of Oreland, Pa., said re-enactments kept her 17-year-old son Mark interested in history.

"When he was little, we took him to re-enactments and he just loved it so much that he joined," Tournier said. "He's learning a lot of stuff and now he's becoming an advocate for keeping history alive. My other son wants to get involved when he becomes of age."

Karyn Edwards, of Mount Holly, brought her 5-year-old daughter and 3-year-old son.

"We live around the block and we try to come every year," Edwards said. "I can remember being her age and my father taking me to Washington's Crossing on Christmas Day."

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