The Wrong Side of the Delaware


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Washington Crossing the Delaware and the Diary of Johannes Reuber, a 17-Year-Old Hessian Soldier

Dr. Normann Günther and Werner Brandau

With notes, illustrations, and the essay by F. W. Junghans (1894)

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The Wrong Side of the Delaware
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Historical Appendix
The historical appendix, originally published in German in 1893–1894, has been translated into English for this edition (2026). No earlier English translation is known to us.
The translation deliberately preserves the character and historical perspective of the original German prose while rendering it in the style of American historical writing of the 1890s. This approach seeks to present a nineteenth-century German historical text in the English of its own period rather than in contemporary English.

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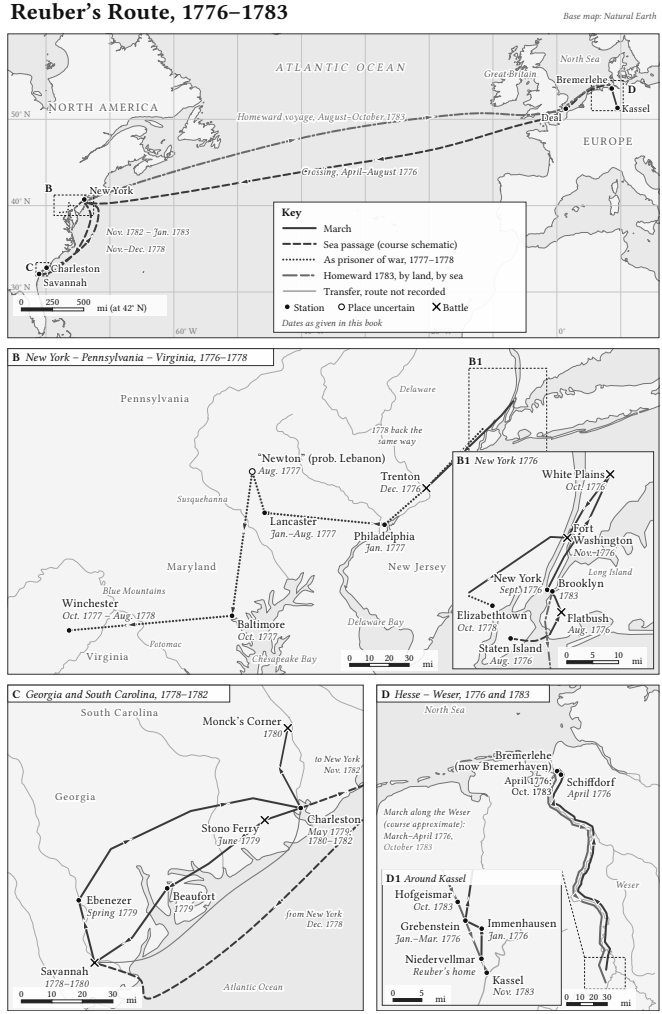
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Map: Reuber's Route, 1776–1783



Reuber's Route, 1776–1783: March to the Weser and voyage to New York (1776), route as a prisoner of war to Winchester in Virginia (1777–1778), service in Georgia and South Carolina (1778–1782), return home via Bremerlehe to Kassel (1783). Stations and dates as given in the text of this book; sea routes schematic. Map: CBBV; base map Natural Earth, public domain.

Historical Background

In Europe, the second half of the eighteenth century was an age of wars and of cabinets. Hesse-Cassel, badly devastated in the Thirty Years' War, had learned early to make a trade out of necessity: the country maintained a standing army that was exceptionally strong for its size, and for many men military service became one of the few reliable sources of income.

This army could be paid for only through subsidies, that is, money from foreign powers, which in return were entitled to make use of Hessian regiments in the event of war. Such treaties had a tradition: in 1677 a Hessian regiment stood in Danish service, and from 1694 on England was the most important partner. With the English money, the small state at times maintained an army proportionally larger than that of Prussia.

Landgrave Frederick II continued this policy. Contemporaries, and still more posterity, spoke of the "soldier trade"; legally, these were treaties between states, not the sale of individual human beings. Unlike many mercenary armies of the time, the Hessian army consisted predominantly of the country's own native sons. Recruitment ran through the canton system: each regiment was assigned a fixed recruiting district, and the soldiers' families were held liable for deserters. In a certain sense, the Hessians were thus closer to a conscript army than to a band of mercenaries.

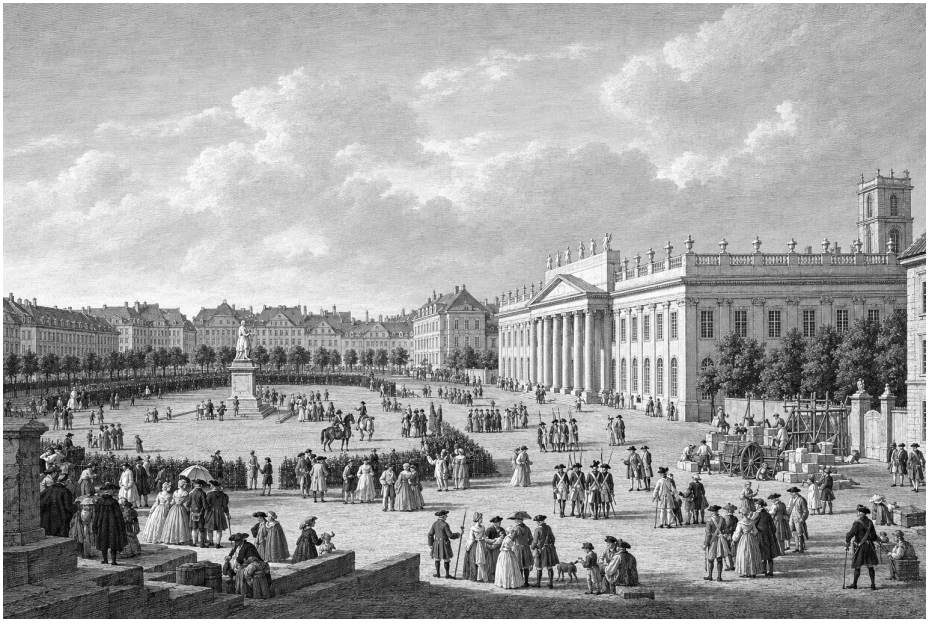
When the conflict between Britain and its American colonies grew into war in 1775, London quickly needed troops that its own small professional army could not provide. A first request went to Russia; Catherine the Great declined.

Now the German princes had their turn. Six imperial estates concluded subsidy treaties: Hesse-Cassel, Brunswick, Hesse-Hanau, Ansbach-Bayreuth, Waldeck, and Anhalt-Zerbst. Hesse-Cassel provided by far the largest contingent; some 12,000 men crossed the Atlantic in 1776, and over the course of the war the number of Hesse-Cassel soldiers sent overseas grew to nearly 19,000.

At first there was no shortage of volunteers. The treaty promised a bounty (enlistment money), regular pay in British currency, and provisions; the recruiters promised booty and adventure besides. For young men from cramped



Monument to Landgrave Frederick II of Hesse-Cassel in Kassel, executed in marble by Samuel Nahl after the model by Johann August Nahl the Elder, unveiled on August 14, 1783. Photo: Werner Brandau.



Kassel around 1783 (illustration after J. H. Tischbein the Elder, 1783)



Thaler of the Landgraviate of Hesse-Cassel from 1776, the so-called Sterntaler. Obverse: head of Landgrave Frederick II; reverse: the star of an order with the Hessian lion and the motto VIRTUTE ET FIDELITATE, legend EIN THALER. Kassel mint, mintmaster Johann Balthasar Reinhard; silver, 35 mm. Photo: Karsten Dahmen, Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, public domain.

village circumstances, the expedition across the sea was both at once, a way out and a promise.

Enthusiasm for War

In the event of death, the surviving dependents were entitled to a pension. Moreover, the Hessian troops were to receive preferential treatment and not be exposed to pointless dangers. Numerous sources report that the soldiers of the German states were better motivated than their British allies. In general, the soldiers who were sent were proud to be allowed to take the field in America for their sovereign.

There were, however, also individual cases in which young lads were pressed into military service. This applied especially to recruitment as replacements for Hessian soldiers in America who had fallen, been captured, or died.

Johannes Reuber

Hardly any other man from Vellmar would later be given as much attention as Johannes Reuber of Niedervellmar, who was 16 years old at the time. In those days the little village had about 60 houses, in which 62 men, 63 women, 76 sons, 63 daughters, as well as eight farmhands and 12 maids lived. Among the people of the village there were a miller, a schoolmaster, three linen weavers, five tailors, six shepherds, 10 day laborers, and three innkeepers.

One of the sons was Johannes Reuber, who was drafted into the Landgrenadier Regiment and sworn in for service abroad against the rebelling American settlers in the 13 British colonies.

The Rothwesten day laborer Johann Hermann Reuber married Anna Margarethe Damm in Niedervellmar on December 30, 1757. A good year later, on March 2, 1759, their only child, Johannes Reuber, was born. In 1773 he was



Niedervellmar in the winter of 1775/76 (based on source images from the LWL-Archivamt für Westfalen and Stefan Flöper)

confirmed there. As in many other families, too, the young man, who was presumably of tall and powerful build, was called up for military service only two years later. On September 15, 1775, he was drafted into the Landgrenadier Regiment and sworn in.

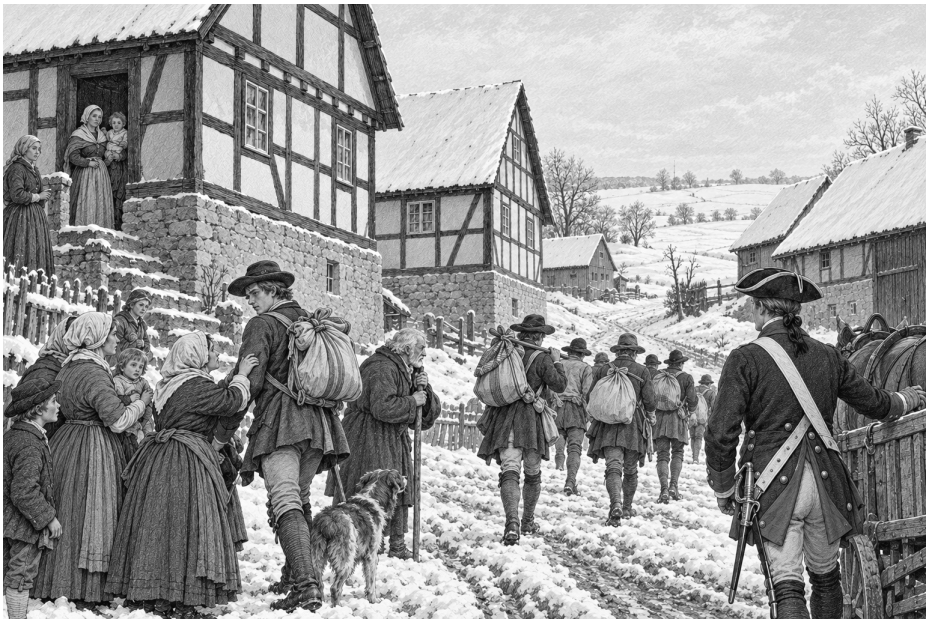
For some time, the settlers in faraway America had been in revolt against British sovereignty.

In the subsidy treaty of January 15, 1776, between the Hessian Landgrave Frederick II and the British King George III, it was agreed that some 12,000 Hessian soldiers would be provided for service in America.

On January 1, 1776, Johannes Reuber, not yet 17 years old, received orders to report in Immenhausen, where Major Matthäus's company was quartered, for transport to America. He was not the only one from his home village. The HETRINA database records a total of about 32 soldiers from Niedervellmar for the war years; three of them were not recruited until between 1779 and 1781.

From Obervellmar there were 16 men; Georg Krug from Frommershausen joined them only in December 1780. Their names are given in the list of names at the end of the book.

It is thanks to the diary entries of young Johannes Reuber of Niedervellmar that we are so well informed today about the events of that time. Over the



Farewell of the young men called up from Niedervellmar in January 1776 (based on source images from the LWL-Archivamt für Westfalen, Stefan Flöper, and Charles M. Lefferts)

entire period from 1776 until the soldiers' return in 1783, Reuber meticulously kept a diary of the journey to America, the operations, and the return to Hesse. It was by no means a matter of course that young people at the end of the eighteenth century could all read and write. Indeed, marriage records from the period show some people still signing their names with three crosses.

Johannes Reuber's diary is a valuable rarity; furnished with many drawings, it is kept in the Kassel University Library.

The British king could not ship the mercenaries to America fast enough. Time was pressing, for not only had the British army by now been forced to evacuate the 13 colonies in North America, but Canada, too, threatened to break away from the mother country.

On January 2, 1776, the company in which Johannes Reuber served moved out in great haste, in bitter cold and deep snow, to the larger town of Grebenstein. On March 3 the order to march out for America was issued there. The battalion was quickly supplied with the equipment needed for field service: knapsacks, bread bags, kettles, flasks, axes, shovels, and picks. In addition, each soldier received 60 cartridges and as many sharp flints. On March 4 the battalion marched out of Grebenstein toward Bremerlehe. To embark at Bremerlehe, the Hessian troops marched along the Weser for more than 215



Recruits drilling in Grebenstein in early 1776; the castle ruins in the background (based on source images by Matthäus Merian, Tilman2007, and Charles M. Lefferts)

miles (350 kilometers). On April 7 the battalion arrived in Schiffdorf, not far from Bremerhaven, where it was taken over by a British commissary and sworn into the service of the British king. The demands made on the soldiers were enormous. Their daily marches covered distances of 9–25 miles (15–40 kilometers). And all the while they had to haul 50–60 pounds of baggage, and the roads they marched on were often very bad. The covered wagons that followed the battalion were loaded with blankets, tents, field kettles, and ammunition. The first Hessian division, which was assembled here, consisted of the following regiments or battalions:

The Jäger Corps
The detached grenadier battalion
The Leib Regiment (Life Guards)
The Erbprinz Regiment
The Prinz Karl Regiment
The Old Lossberg Regiment
The von Trümbach Regiment
The von Mirbach Regiment
The Knyphausen Regiment
The von Donop Regiment
The von Ditfurth Regiment
Rall's grenadier battalion

All these troops were under the command of General von Heister. A second division under the command of General von Knyphausen followed a short time afterward and was embarked at Ritzebüttel. It consisted of the following regiments:

A mounted Jäger Corps
A detached grenadier battalion
The Wuttginau Regiment
The von Bünau Garrison Regiment
The Wissenbach Regiment
The Huyn Regiment
The von Stein Regiment

According to the Hessian drill regulations of 1767, an infantry regiment consisted of one battalion of five companies together with a grenadier company. The handsomest and tallest men formed the two flank or grenadier companies. The grenadier company was a good 100 men strong. In wartime the grenadier companies of four regiments were combined into a grenadier



The battalion's march to the Weser in March 1776

battalion. Rall's, to which Johannes Reuber belonged, was by contrast a standing grenadier regiment.



Charles M. Lefferts: Grenadier of the Hessian Rall Regiment in the uniform worn at Trenton in December 1776. Watercolor and gouache, c. 1910, digitally upscaled. New-York Historical Society, public domain.