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Hessians

Scott Stephenson: As you entered this Gallery, who was more surprised, you or the teenaged Hessian soldier caught in the act of plundering a New Jersey home in December 1776? You can explore the soldiers known as Hessians, who were from small kingdoms in various parts of what's now Germany. These were auxiliaries. Eventually, more than 30,000 of them were hired by King George III to supplement the British soldiers who were sent to America to crush the rebellion. Now in December of 1776, as Washington's army had been pushed out of New Jersey and British forces had advanced through that state, the Hessians garrison the number of small outposts along the Delaware River, including the town of Trenton, New Jersey.

By Christmas 1776, many people felt that the American Revolution was over, but in a series of actions that historians call the "Ten Crucial Days," the Revolution got a second chance. Starting on Christmas night 1776, Washington's army crosses the Delaware River and attacks the Hessian garrison at Trenton. You can explore the Battle of Princeton on January 3, 1777, by using the light up map on the wall of the Gallery. Now if you look to the left of that map, you'll see a long slender case. It has a sword and a soldier's bayonet crossed in the middle of it. The sword is an extraordinary survivor, once carried by a Scottish immigrant named Hugh Mercer who joined the Revolutionary Army and rose to be a general. At the Battle of Princeton on January 3, 1777, Mercer commanded American troops in advance of Washington's army and during a British counter-attack was knocked from his horse. Soldiers from the British 17th Regiment surrounded him, and thinking that they had captured George Washington himself, demanded that he surrender. Mercer defiantly fought against them with the sword you see in front of you, and the soldiers mortally wounded him by clubbing him and stabbing him with their bayonets.

The bayonet that you see in this case is marked to the 17th Regiment and may well have been one of the implements used to inflict those mortal wounds. Mercer died nine days later from the wounds he suffered at the Battle of Princeton. But just a little bit further in the Museum, you'll be able to find out about the fate of his orphan son, William Mercer. Before you head into the next Gallery, don't miss the Oneida Nation Theater, where you can learn about the United States' forgotten allies. Now, this is early 1777 and up until this point, British and American officials had encouraged native people, American Indians, to remain neutral in what was essentially someone else's civil war. But after the Declaration of Independence, both sides put pressure on American Indians to declare themselves on one side or the other; they could no longer remain neutral. Please feel free to move among these figures and even touch them as these men and women debate how they'll preserve their sovereignty and independence in the midst of the Revolutionary War.