On January 3, 1777, Captain Hamilton and his 30-man cannon crew marched to Princeton, New Jersey, and participated with General Washington’s army in an attack on the British to save Philadelphia from capture. This painting illustrates the moment Washington (wearing a blue sash) rode onto the battlefield and rallied his troops, who had been retreating. Hamilton’s crew fought near Nassau Hall, which is in the distance at the far right, visible just above the British lines. This building formed part of the College of New Jersey, now known as Princeton University. His artillery, which used cannons to fire large iron balls called solid shot and bags of smaller iron balls called grapeshot, kept up a steady fire.

The British soldiers are on the right. The artist, William “Billy” Mercer, who was both deaf and unable to speak, copied this scene very closely from a circa 1782 painting by James Peale. Billy’s father, General Hugh Mercer, was killed in this Battle, where it was said the British mistook him for Washington. He can be seen in the middle distance, on the ground next to his wounded horse.

Discussion Prompts
Who are the most important people in this painting?
Why do you believe that they are the most important people?
What would it feel like to be there? (Hint: Think about your five senses, and emotions.)
What would it take to be successful in a battle like this?