

George Washington crosses the Delaware

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"Washington Crossing the Delaware" by Emanuel Leutze. Completed in 1851, the painting hangs in the the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

General George Washington's crossing of the Delaware River was a key moment of the American Revolution. This major victory during the fight for the colonies' independence was made famous in a portrait by Emanuel Leutze. The painting, however, does not tell the whole story about what actually happened that cold day in December.



What would Americans identify as the most famous moment of the American Revolution? Some might choose the "Shot Heard 'Round the World" at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. Others might pick the surrender of General Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia, signaling victory for the American cause. For many Americans, though, it is the image of General George Washington crossing the mighty Delaware River that would come to mind first.

This image was made famous by Emanuel Leutze, a German-born painter who hoped to inspire reforms in his home country during the 1850s. His painting shows Washington standing with one

knee bent at the front of a ship. The general is leading his troops to a surprise attack, an American flag waving above them. Leutze's painting has become iconic. Monumental in size (12.4 by 21.3 feet) and symbolism, this painting has not only inspired extreme patriotism. It has also perpetuated some common misconceptions about Washington's surprise raid on Hessian forces.

Washington's Troops Were Losing Hope

The Hessians were hired German soldiers who fought for the British. Washington attacked their military base in Trenton, New Jersey, on Christmas Day 1776, inspiring new hope for the Patriot Army. Supplies were low, as was morale, during this period. Washington feared more troubles were ahead for the Continental Army. As losses mounted for the Americans, it became more difficult to retain soldiers, with many choosing to desert rather than face a cold winter with limited supplies.

Washington understood the importance of a much-needed victory before the year let out, and a group of around 1,300 to 1,500 Hessians at Trenton became his target. Washington and his men (around 2,400) were part of a larger plan that included two other crossings led by other American military leaders. However, only Washington and his men were successful in reaching the Hessians. They arrived in Trenton with support from Colonel Henry Knox, who was stationed with men at the top of the town. Washington and his soldiers sailed on cargo ships that ranged from 40 to 60 feet in length. On the icy waters of the Delaware River, they were hit with a harsh rain that turned to a snow-sleet mix by midnight. Traveling with horses and more men behind him, Washington had support from experienced seamen. They were under the command of Colonel John Glover at the crossing site.

A Representation Of The Attack

This is quite the contrast from the image portrayed by Leutze's painting. Washington's boat was much larger than is painted, the men in the painting's ship represent a diverse group of 12 soldiers, and the flag in the image was not actually designed until after the event took place. Leutze's work was more of a representation of what the event, and Washington specifically, symbolized. (It should be noted that Leutze did attempt to be accurate, but also hoped to inspire a greater purpose.) His portrait has become intermixed with the history of the moment itself. That has made it difficult for some to separate reality from folklore.

The Hessians were somewhat aware an attack was coming, thanks to a British spy located inside Washington's headquarters. Although the Hessians did not fully expect Washington to attack, they were on alert that it was possible. Constant false alarms coupled with bad weather conditions gave Washington the surprise opening he and his men needed to launch a successful attack. Once the Continental Army arrived onshore, their execution was excellent. The Hessians surrendered before morning and the Americans suffered few casualties. Stories of this bold, overwhelming American victory grew in legend as they reached other colonists.

A Portrait That Is Larger Than Life

The morale boost that resulted from Washington's surprise attack has continued to grow in legend in classrooms across the country. In large part, this is because of Emanuel Leutze's portrait. Painted larger in size than the other men on the boat, Washington's stature represents the

importance of his role in the American cause. Leutze completed his painting during the 1850s, a period of unrest and division in the United States. He intended the work to suggest a sense of national pride and unity. Many studies have been done to analyze Leutze's use of the Stars and Stripes flag or his placing of a diverse group of Americans in Washington's boat.

These symbols reinforced the hopes that Leutze had for his own country of Germany. At the same time, they also contributed to the creation of an American icon. Today, the painting hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It continues to inspire people while reminding them of the incredible challenges Washington and his men faced.

Quiz

1 Which two sentences from the article include central ideas of the article?

1. *The painting, however, does not tell the whole story about what actually happened that cold day in December.*
2. *This image was made famous by Emanuel Leutze, a German-born painter who hoped to inspire reforms in his home country during the 1850s.*
3. *Leutze's work was more of a representation of what the event, and Washington specifically, symbolized.*
4. *The Hessians were somewhat aware an attack was coming, thanks to a British spy located inside Washington's headquarters.*

- (A) 1 and 3
- (B) 2 and 3
- (C) 1 and 4
- (D) 2 and 4

2 Which statement would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?

- (A) Washington was traveling with horses and additional soldiers behind him.
- (B) The soldiers arrived in Trenton with support from Colonel Henry Knox and his men.
- (C) Washington's attack on the Hessians was a key turning point for American morale.
- (D) The Hessians Washington fought were German soldiers hired by the British.

3 Read the selection from the introduction [paragraphs 1-3].

Leutze's painting has become iconic. Monumental in size (12.4 by 21.3 feet) and symbolism, this painting has not only inspired extreme patriotism. It has also perpetuated some common misconceptions about Washington's surprise raid on Hessian forces.

Which two words could BEST replace "monumental" and "perpetuated" in the selection above?

- (A) significant; timed
- (B) massive; advanced
- (C) dreadful; confused
- (D) celebratory; ended

4 Read the selection from the section "A Representation Of The Attack."

Once the Continental Army arrived onshore, their execution was excellent. The Hessians surrendered before morning and the Americans suffered few casualties.

Which option is the BEST definition of the word "execution" as it is used in the selection above?

- (A) punishment of those guilty of crimes
- (B) staging and presentation of ideas
- (C) performance while carrying out a plan
- (D) survival despite being terribly injured