

Washington Crosses the Delaware

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject: U.S. History

Time Required: One or two 50-minute class periods

Historical Thinking Skills: Analysis, Contextualization, Synthesis

Objective: Students will analyze a primary source that depicts Washington's crossing of the Delaware during the Revolutionary War.

Materials:

- 1) [*Washington Crossing the Delaware*, Emanuel Leutze, 1851](#)
- 2) [*The International Magazine of Literature, Art, and Science*, March 1, 1851](#)

Background:

Hardly six months after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the American Continental Army faced a dire predicament as winter approached in 1776. A significant number of American soldiers had returned to their farms for the fall harvest, and the enlistment period for many soldiers would expire by year's end. General George Washington and his forces had suffered a humiliating defeat at the Battle of Long Island that summer and American morale was at a low point.

However, Washington remained steadfast in his commitment to American independence, and developed a plan in which his army would launch a Christmas surprise attack on Trenton, New Jersey. Some 2,000 soldiers and Washington himself braved the frigid cold and crossed the ice-laden Delaware river on December 25th, reaching Trenton by 8 am and capturing a completely unprepared garrison of Hessian mercenaries hired by the British to fight against the Americans. The victory at the Battle of Trenton not only provided Washington's army with much-needed arms and ammunition, but it also quickly bolstered American morale and became a turning point in the Revolutionary War.

The following is a quote from a magazine about Emanuel Leutze's work, *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (included below). Use this quote to answer the following questions.



"The tall and majestic form of the man in whose hands at that hour lay the fate of millions, rises from the group, standing slightly bent, forward, with one foot on the bottom of the boat, the other on the forward bench. His mild yet serious and commanding glance seems seeking to pierce the mist of the farther shore and discover the enemy, while intimations of the future grandeur of his country rise upon his mind."

Class Activities:

- 1) Analyze the quotation from above. Identify and explain the tone of the quotation. To what extent does this quotation reflect students' prior knowledge of George Washington?
- 2) Hold a class debate in which students argue for or against the following statement: "Washington crossing the Delaware was the most important turning point of the Revolutionary War."
- 3) Ask students to identify one figure from the painting and write a short biography about this person using primary sources. Alternatively, select one figure and ask students to write a letter from the perspective of the soldier about his experience of the crossing.

Research Activities:

- 1) Ask students to research the Battle of Trenton from both the American and the British perspectives.
- 2) Ask students to research other iconic paintings that depict Americans at war. Discuss the prevalent themes in these works, and how the subjects of these works have changed over time.
- 3) Ask students to research other paintings by Emanuel Leutze. Identify the themes that emerge throughout his works and explain the extent to which Leutze romanticized specific historical events.



Washington Crossing the Delaware, 1851
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/11417>

