CROSSING THE DELAWARE

Title: Crossing of the Delaware and the Battle of Trenton  
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Grade Level: Middle School  
Estimated Time: 2 days

Overview:
In this lesson, students will read primary documents and study a painting to understand the importance of the crossing of the Delaware and the Battle of Trenton to the Revolutionary cause. This lesson plan works well as part of a unit on the Revolutionary War. Students need to have a background on the causes of the war before beginning the lesson. They should know about the discouraging defeats of General Washington and his soldiers in New York, the poorly trained troops at his command, and the terrible conditions at Valley Forge.

Historical Background:
Washington’s crossing of the Delaware on December 25, 1776, resulted in a stunning American victory. Continental forces crossed the icy river and captured nearly 1,000 surprised Hessians at the Trenton outpost. The daring strike came during a low point in the conflict for the Americans. They had suffered a series of losses on the battlefield and faced the real prospect of a total collapse of their army. This victory and a second unlikely success at Princeton allowed Washington to reestablish an American presence in New Jersey, which had been completely under British control, and rally at least some degree of public opinion for the patriot cause.

Two excellent sources on these events are a book by David Hackett Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing* and a report on the painting, “George Washington Crossing the Delaware” given by Ina Jaffe on National Public Radio, Morning Edition (http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/georgewashington/index.html). Fischer writes a detailed account of the crossing of the Delaware River and the Battles of Trenton and Princeton. He also offers an in-depth analysis of the painting. Jaffe discusses the historical inaccuracies represented in the painting.

Objectives:
Students will:
1. Interpret and analyze primary documents.  
2. Apply knowledge from primary documents to describe the crossing of the Delaware and the Battle of Trenton  
3. Analyze a work of art from its historical and cultural perspective  
4. Recognize the leadership qualities of George Washington  
5. Understand the importance of the Battle of Trenton to the Revolutionary cause  
6. Write a textbook account about the crossing of the Delaware and the Battle of Trenton.
Standards of Learning: (Virginia and United States History to 1877)

Skills

USI.1 Students will develop skills for historical and geographical analysis, including the ability to
a) identify and interpret primary and secondary source documents to increase understanding of events and life in United States history to 1877;
d) interpret ideas and events from different historical perspectives;
e) evaluate and discuss issues orally and in writing.

Content

USI.6 The student will demonstrate knowledge of the causes and results of the American Revolution by
c) describing key events and the roles of key individuals in the American Revolution, with emphasis on George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry

Materials:

Student worksheets:
Worksheet # 1: The Winter of Our Discontents

Primary Sources:
Source 1: Excerpts from the diary of Colonel John Fitzgerald
Source 2: “George Washington Crossing the Delaware” (painting)
Source 3: Excerpts from “The Crisis” by Thomas Paine

Secondary sources: Two different versions of the state of the Hessians when George Washington and his troops captured Trenton.
The Americans Excerpt describing the condition of the Hessians
Washington’s Crossing Contrasting interpretation

Strategies:

Day 1
Each student will work with a partner to analyze two primary documents. The goal is to develop an understanding of the difficult crossing of the Delaware and the power of art to convey the emotion and drama of the times. Students have been assigned readings on the difficult conditions at Valley Forge.

1. Hook: Display the painting for the class. Brainstorm with students on what the picture means and how it represents an historical event. Based on responses, date the painting for students and briefly describe the background of the painter (Washington’s Crossing, Introduction, pp 1-6). Ask a student to come to the map and locate the Delaware River. Show the locations of the British and American forces. Describe the weather conditions and the troop movements.

2. Distribute the worksheet and the excerpt from Colonel Fitzgerald’s diary. Students will work cooperatively to complete the worksheet. Circulate around the room, checking progress. Collect the worksheets.

Wrap up: Display the painting again and discuss the responses on the worksheets. Ask students the following questions:
Does this painting represent an accurate portrayal of history? If the answer is no, why not?

What story does the painting tell about the events?

Does the diary excerpt tell the same story or a different story of the events?

How might the painting influence our impression of the events?

What do this painting and the diary tell you about the leadership of George Washington?

Can you think of any other historical works of art in our community? What stories do they tell?

Day 2
1. Distribute the handout of the contrasting views regarding the alleged drunkenness of the Hessians. Lead a discussion with the students posing the following questions:

   - How would we know which interpretation is true?
   - What facts do the two accounts agree on? On what facts do they disagree?
   - What information would be necessary to acquire a “true” interpretation of events?
   - Do interpretations of history change? Can you think of any examples?
   - What conclusions can we draw about the study of history and the kinds of sources we use to understand the past?

2. As a culminating activity, students will:

   - Write a three paragraph account of the Crossing of the Delaware and the Battle of Trenton for a history textbook.

Assessment: Rubric for Culminating Activity

A rubric might specify that an exemplary three-paragraph account of the crossing of the Delaware and the Battle of Trenton for a history textbook would:

   - Clearly acknowledge that there are contrasting views on these subjects
   - Include a description of George Washington as a leader
   - Provide evidence from both primary and secondary sources in the account
   - Demonstrate that the student planned, drafted, revised and edited his or her account. (This a requirement included in the 6th grade English SOLs.)

A proficient account would contain most of these requirements, an adequate account would contain some, and an inadequate account would contain few or none of these requirements.
Differentiation: Ask volunteers to read aloud excerpts from Tomas Paine’s “The Crisis” (primary source #3). Ask able students to explain the importance of this document as a propaganda pamphlet to rouse the colonists to the cause in the face of discouraging setbacks. Selectively cut the diary of Colonel John Fitzgerald (primary source #2) to a shorter length for less able students. Consider working with the art teacher to continue a discussion of the painting. Provide a choice of culminating activities that includes the following assignment as well as the three-paragraph account: Create a drawing/painting/poem/song that reflects the crossing of the Delaware and the Battle of Trenton in American History.

Additional Resources

Bibliography


Fischer, David Hackett. Crossing the Delaware, New York: Oxford Press, 2004


**Websites**

http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/georgewashington/index.html A site that compares the symbolic nature of the painting to historical reality.

http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/E/paine/painexx.htm A site that provides a background for the Thomas Paine’s, “The Crisis.”

http://libertyonline.hypermall.com/Paine/Crisis/Crisis-TOC.html A site that provides the full text of “The Crisis.”

The largest collection of original George Washington documents, this site offers full-text searchable versions, including both images of the original materials and (in most cases) annotated transcriptions

**National Park Service, “Valley Forge National Historical Park”**
A well-designed site that caters to tourists and genealogists, this web-based resource contains an interactive guide map, lists of activities and events, a muster roll database, and useful background essays

**Ten Crucial Days: The Crossing of the Delaware and the Battles of Trenton and Princeton**
A site launched to commemorate the reenactment of Washington’s Crossing of the Delaware and the Battles of Trenton and Princeton, it also boasts a comprehensive history of these actions, as well as related links and information about reenactments

**University of Virginia, “The Papers of George Washington”**
The site includes selected documents and scholarly articles about Washington’s life and career, including an especially insightful essay by historian Benjamin Newcomb on the decision to encamp at Valley Forge
**Worksheet #1: Crossing the Delaware**

Directions: Today you will work in pairs to analyze two primary sources, a diary and a painting. Your goal is to develop an understanding of the conditions faced by Washington and the soldiers at Valley Forge.

1. Look at the painting, “Washington Crossing the Delaware.” Describe the scene illustrated by the artist. What are the conditions? How do the people shown react to those conditions? (3 points)

2. Why is Washington placed in the center of the painting? What does his appearance tell you? What is the artist trying to say about Washington based on how he is depicted? (3 points)

Read the Source #2, Excerpt from the Diary of Colonel John Fitzgerald.

3. Give specific quotes from his journal that support the opinions you stated in Question 1. (3 points)

4. In what ways are the images shown in the painting and the ideas expressed in the journal similar? different? (3 points)

5. If you were Washington, what actions would you have taken based on the conditions shown in the painting and in the journal? Why? (5 points)

6. Compared to other battles fought in the Revolutionary War and other wars in American history, this one seems quite small. Why do you think historians consider this event so important? (5 points)
7. How do you think the Battle of Trenton shaped the war? (3 points)

Primary Sources

Source #1: George Washington Crossing the Delaware

http://www.explorepahistory.com/ExplorePAHistory/les121_hs_rev01_scr02.html
Christmas, 6 p.m….It is fearfully cold and raw and a snow-storm setting in. The wind is northeast and beats in the faces of the men. It will be a terrible night for the soldiers who have no shoes. Some of them have tied old rags around their feet, but I have not heard a man complain…I have never seen Washington so determined as he is now…He stands on the bank of the stream, wrapped his cloak superintending the landing of his troops. He is calm and collected, but very determined. The storm is changing to sleet and cuts like a knife…

[3 A.M.] I am sitting in the ferry house. The troops are all over, and boats have gone back for the artillery. We are three hours behind the set time…[the fishermen directing the boats] have had a hard time to force boats through the floating ice with the snow drifting in their faces…

…it was broad daylight when we came to a house where a man was chopping wood. He was much surprised when he saw us. “Can you tell me where the Hessian picket is?” Washington asked. The man brightened, and he pointed toward the house of Mr. Howell.

It was just eight o’clock. Looking down the road I saw a Hessian running out from the house. He yelled in Dutch and swung his arms. Three or four others came out with their guns. Two of them fired at us but the bullets whistled over our heads. Some of General Stephen’s men rushed forward and captured two. They took to their heels, running toward Mr. Calhoun’s house, where the picket guard was stationed, about twenty men under Captain Altenbrockum. They came running out of the house. The Captain flourished his sword and tried to form his men. Some of them fired at us, others ran toward the village.

The next moment we heard drums beat and a bugle sound, and then from the west came the boom of cannon. General Washington’s face lighted up instantly, for he know that it was one of [General John Sullivan’s] guns.

…We could see a great commotion down toward the meetinghouse, men running here and there, officers swinging their swords, artillerymen harnessing their horses. Captain Forrest unlimbered his guns. Washington gave the order to advance, and we rushed on the junction of King and Queen streets. Forrest wheeled six of his cannon into position to sweep both streets. The riflemen under Colonel Hand and Scott’s and Lawson’s battalions went upon the run through the fields on the left to gain possession of the Princeton Road. The Hessians were just ready to open fire with two of their cannon when Captain [William] Washington and Lieutenant [James] Monroe with their men rushed forward and captured them.
We saw [Colonel Johann] Rall [commander of the Hessians] riding up the street from his headquarters which were at Stacy Potts’ house. We could hear him shouting Dutch, “My brave soldiers, advance.”

His men were frightened and confused, for our men were firing upon them from fences and houses and they were falling fast. Instead of advancing they ran into an apple orchard. The officers tried to rally them, but our men kept advancing and picking off the officers. It was not long before Rall tumbled from his horse and his soldiers threw down their guns and gave themselves up as prisoners…

[9 P.M.]…I have just been with General Washington and [Nathanael] Greene to see Rall. He will not live through the night. He asked that his men might be kindly treated. Washington promised that he would see they were well cared for.”

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as freedom should not be highly rated. Britain, with an army to enforce her tyranny, has declared that she has a right (not only to tax) but "to bind us in all cases whatsoever" and if being bound in that manner, is not slavery, then is there not such a thing as slavery upon earth. Even the expression is impious; for so unlimited a power can belong only to God. (….)

As I was with the troops at Fort Lee, and marched with them to the edge of Pennsylvania, I am well acquainted with many circumstances, which those who live at a distance know but little or nothing of. Our situation there was exceedingly cramped, the place being a narrow neck of land between the North River and the Hackensack. Our force was inconsiderable, being not one-fourth so great as Howe could bring against us. We had no army at hand to have relieved the garrison, had we shut ourselves up and stood on our defence. Our ammunition, light artillery, and the best part of our stores, had been removed, on the apprehension that Howe would endeavor to penetrate the Jerseys, in which case Fort Lee could be of no use to us; for it must occur to every thinking man, whether in the army or not, that these kind of field forts are only for temporary purposes, and last in use no longer than the enemy directs his force against the particular object which such forts are raised to defend. Such was our situation and condition at Fort Lee on the morning of the 20th of November, when an officer arrived with information that the enemy with 200 boats had landed about seven miles above; Major General [Nathaniel] Green, who commanded the garrison, immediately ordered them under arms, and sent express to General Washington at the town of Hackensack, distant by the way of the ferry = six miles. Our first object was to secure the bridge over the Hackensack, which laid up the river between the enemy and us, about six miles from us, and three from them. General Washington arrived in about three-quarters of an hour, and marched at the head of the troops towards the bridge, which place I expected we should have a brush for; however, they did not choose to dispute it with us, and the greatest part of our troops went over the bridge, the rest over the ferry, except some which passed at a mill on a small creek, between the bridge and the ferry, and made their way through some marshy grounds up to the town of Hackensack, and there passed the river. We brought off as much baggage as the wagons could contain, the rest was lost. The simple object was to bring off the garrison, and march them on till they could be strengthened by the Jersey or Pennsylvania militia, so as to be enabled to make a stand. We staid four days at Newark, collected our out-posts with some of the Jersey militia, and marched out twice to meet the enemy, on being informed that they were advancing, though our numbers were greatly inferior to theirs. Howe, in my little opinion, committed a great error in generalship in not throwing a body of forces off from Staten Island through Amboy, by which means he might have seized all our stores at Brunswick, and intercepted our march into
Pennsylvania; but if we believe the power of hell to be limited, we must likewise believe that their agents are under some providential control. (....)
Secondary Sources: Two different versions on the state of the Hessians when George Washington and his troops captured Trenton

Version 1
“By 8 o’clock the morning, the men had marched nine miles through sleet and snow to the objective—Trenton, New Jersey, held by a garrison of Hessians. Lulled into confidence by the storm, most of the Hessians had drunk too much rum the night before and were still sleeping it off.”


Version 2
“While the (American) officers talked, the army found forty hogsheads of rum in Trenton. When Washington found out about it, he ordered the rum destroyed, but the commander- in-chief may have been the last to know. Before his officers could act, more than a few hogsheads had been emptied in another way. The adjutant of the army reported that ‘the soldiers drank too freely to admit of discipline or Defence.’ In a word, some of the American victors celebrated their own success by getting gloriously drunk and even more disorderly than usual.”