

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 (50 minute periods)

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, and the poorly trained and equipped troops at his command.

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 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 support for the patriot cause, encourage re-enlistments, and restore confidence in Washington's leadership.

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.

Major Understanding:

It is important for students to recognize the importance of primary documents to learn about our past and the power of art to present ideas and express emotional and symbolic meaning. Using the autobiography of a Revolutionary War veteran and a painting of Washington crossing the Delaware River, students will understand that despite poorly trained and equipped troops and terrible weather conditions, the Continental Army won a stunning victory at Trenton.

It is important for students to know that this victory of Washington and the Continental Army, despite insurmountable obstacles, raised patriot morale in the face of the disastrous New York campaign, encouraged re-enlistments, and restored confidence in the leadership of Washington.

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 a 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.

Culminating activity

- Students will write a three paragraph account for a history text book about the Crossing of the Delaware and the conditions faced by soldiers in the Battle of Trenton.

Resources

Boatner, Mark M. *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution*. New York: D. McKay & Co., 1966.

Danzer, Gerald et al. *The Americans*. Boston: McDougal Littell, 2003.
A history text book written for high school students.

Dwyer, William. *This Day is Ours! November 1776-January 1777: An Inside View of the Battles of Trenton and Princeton*. New York: Viking Press, 1983

Epic on the Schuylkill: The Valley Forge Encampment. Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1976.

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

A detailed study of the Battle of Trenton that is exhaustively researched and reads like a novel.

Greenwood, John. *The Revolutionary Services of John Greenwood: A Young Patriot in the American Revolution*, Lexington, Kentucky: Westvaco Corporation, 1981.

The personal recollections of a veteran of the Revolutionary War at the Trenton campaign written in 1809 and published in 1981.

Silverman, Sharon Hernes. "The Boat Ride That Changed America: Washington Crossing Historic Park," *Pennsylvania Heritage* 25 (1999), 12-21.

Smith, Samuel Stelle. *Fight for the Delaware 1777*. Monmouth Beach, NJ: Philip Freneau Press, 1970.

Websites

<http://libertyonline.hypermall.com/Paine/Crisis/Crisis-TOC.html>

A site that provides the full text of "The Crisis."

Library of Congress, "George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress"

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

http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/gw/el_gw.htm

A source that offers excellent questions to prompt students to think about the artistic composition of the painting, *Crossing the Delaware*, and analyze its message.

<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."

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.

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.

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/de/Washington_Crossing_the_Delaware.png

This site offers a clear image of the painting, “Washington Crossing the Delaware,” for students to analyze.

Day 1

Title: Crossing the Delaware

Objectives:

Students will:

1. Analyze the painting, *Washington Crossing the Delaware* by Emanuel Leutze
2. Examine a primary source of a Revolutionary War veteran who participated in the Battle of Trenton.
3. Understand the power of art to present ideas and express emotional and symbolic meaning.

Materials:

- Source 1, The Winter of Our Discontents
- Map of U.S. circa 1776
- A large clear image of “George Washington Crossing the Delaware”
http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/de/Washington_Crossing_the_Delaware.png
- Washington’s Crossing by David Hackett Fischer, Introduction, pp 1-6 and/or
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h48.html>
- An artistic perspective on the painting
- http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/gw/el_gw.htm

Strategies:

1. **Hook:** Display the painting for the class.

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/de/Washington_Crossing_the_Delaware.png

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* by David Hackett Fischer, Introduction, pp 1-6 and the website, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h48.html>). Using an historical map, locate the Delaware River and show the locations of the British and American forces.

2. Distribute the worksheet with the questions about the painting and the excerpt from John Greenwood’s recollections (Source 1). Students will work in pairs or small groups to complete the worksheet. Circulate around the room, checking progress. Collect the worksheets.

3. Display the painting again and discuss the responses on the worksheet. Ask students the following questions:

- Does this painting represent an accurate portrayal of history? If the answer is no, what are the inaccuracies in the painting?
<http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/georgewashington/index.html>
- Who was the initial audience for this painting? What story does the painting tell about the event?

- Does Greenwood’s account tell the same story as implied in the painting or a different story of the events?
- John Greenwood did not write about his experiences at the Battle of Trenton until 1809. Are his recollections still a primary source?
- How might the painting influence our impression of the events?
- What message does this painting express about the leadership of George Washington?
- Can you think of any other historical works of art in our community? What impressions do they convey (e.g., Iwo Jima and Lincoln memorials?).

Day 2

Title: The Battle of Trenton

Objectives

Students will:

1. Analyze both secondary and primary sources to compare and contrast conflicting versions of an historical even.
2. Understand the importance of the Battle of Trenton.

Materials:

Secondary sources recounting two different versions of the condition of the Hessians when George Washington and his troops captured Trenton.

- *The Americans*, (U.S. history textbook): excerpt describing the condition of the Hessians and *Washington’s Crossing* by David Hackett Fischer: contrasting interpretation.

Source 2: Greenwood’s description of the Hessian soldiers who fought at Trenton.

Source 3: Excerpts from “The Crisis” by Thomas Paine

Strategies:

1. Distribute the handout of the contrasting views expressed in secondary sources regarding the alleged drunkenness of the Hessians.
 - How would we know which interpretation is true?
 - What facts do the two secondary accounts agree on? On what facts do they disagree?
 - What information would be necessary to acquire a “true” interpretation of events?
2. Then ask students to read John Greenwood’s account (Source 2k). Lead a discussion with the students posing the following questions:
 - What does John Greenwood’s account tell us?

- 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?

3. Wrap-up: Summarize the events surrounding the Battle of Trenton. Compared to other battles in the American Revolution this battle seems rather insignificant. Ask students why historians consider this small battle so important? (After the discouraging New York campaign it encouraged enlistments and re-enlistments in the army, raised morale to the patriot cause and restored confidence in the leadership of George Washington).

Extension Activity:

Teachers could use this opportunity to discuss the strategy Washington developed to fight the British. The American Memory website, <http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/timeline/amrev/north/posts.html> provides a letter from George Washington that describes his strategy of “War of the Posts.”

Homework/Culminating Activity:

Students will write a three paragraph account for a history text book about the importance of the Crossing of the Delaware and the victory at Trenton.

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 as expressed in the painting
- 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 is a requirement included in ACPS’ 6th grade English SOLs.)

A proficient account would contain all 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 colonists to the cause in the face of discouraging setbacks.
- Selectively cut the diary of John Greenwood (primary source #1) to a shorter length for less able students.

- Consider working with an art teacher to continue a discussion of the painting. The website from the Metropolitan Museum offers some interesting questions for students to use to analyze the painting. http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/gw/el_gw.htm
- 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.

Worksheet: Crossing the Delaware

Directions: Today you will work in pairs to analyze a painting and a primary source, the recollections of a Revolutionary War veteran. Your goal is to develop an understanding of the conditions faced by Washington and the soldiers as they crossed the Delaware.

1. Describe the scene illustrated by the artist. What are the conditions?
2. Who are the people?
3. How do the people shown react to those conditions? (3 points)
4. 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)
5. What questions do you have about this painting?

Read Source 1, *The Wartime Services of John Greenwood of Boston: A Young Patriot in the American Revolution.*

1. Give specific quotes from Greenwood's recollections that describe the conditions of the crossing.
2. In what ways are the images shown in the painting and the facts recounted in Greenwood's recollections similar? Different?
4. If you were Washington, what actions would you have taken based on the conditions shown in the painting and in Greenwood's recollections? Why?
5. How do you think the Battle of Trenton will affect the outcome of the Revolutionary War? (3 points)

Source 1: *The Wartime Services of John Greenwood: A Young Patriot in the American Revolution*, pp. 80 -81

...A day or two after reaching Newton we were paraded one afternoon to march and attack Trenton. If I recollect aright the sun was about half an hour high and shining brightly, but it had no sooner set than it began to drizzle or grow wet, and when we came to the river it rained. Every man had sixty rounds of cartridges served out to him, and as I then had a gun, as indeed every officer had, I put the number which I received, some in my pockets and some in my little cartridge-box. Over the river we then went in a flat-bottomed scow, and as I was with first that crossed, we had to wait for the rest and so began to pull down the fences and make fires to warm ourselves, for the storm was increasing rapidly. After a while it rained, hailed, snowed, and froze, and at the same time blew a perfect hurricane; so much so that I perfectly recollect, after putting the rails on to burn, the wind and the fire would cut them in two in a moment, and when I turned my face toward the fire my back would be freezing. However, as my usual acuteness had not forsaken me, by turning round and round I kept myself from perishing before the large bonfire.

The noise of the soldiers coming over and clearing away the ice, the rattling of the cannon wheels on the frozen ground, and the cheerfulness of my fellow-comrades as I acknowledge myself to be, I felt great pleasure, more that I now do in writing about it. After our men had all crossed __ and there not, as I could see, more 200 of us ___ we began an apparent circuitous march, not advancing faster than a child ten years old could walk, and stopping frequently, though for what purpose I know not. During the whole night it alternately hailed, rained, snowed, and blew tremendously. I recollect very well that at one time, when we halted on the road, I sat down on the stump of a tree and was so benumbed with cold that I wanted to go to sleep; had I been passed unnoticed I should have frozen to death without knowing it; but as good luck always attended me, Sergeant Madden came and, rousing me up, made me walk about. We then began to march again, just in the old slow way, until the dawn of day, about half-past seven in the morning.

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.”

[This excerpt is from an American history textbook: Gerald A. Danzer, et. al. *The Americans*]

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.”

[A detailed account of the Battles of Trenton and Princeton in David Hackett Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, p. 256]

Source 2: *The Wartime Services of John Greenwood: A Young Patriot in the American Revolution*

I have heard that we surprised the enemy; if we did, they must have been a lazy, indolent set of rascals, which is nothing to the credit of a regular army, as the English called themselves. But anyone who would even suppose such a thing must indeed be ignorant, when it is well known our whole country was filled with timid, designing Tories and informers of all descriptions, and our march so slow that it was impossible but that they should be apprised of it. It was likewise asserted at the same time that the enemy were all drunk; if they were, it shows there was no good discipline among those brave, regular troops. If they were drunk, I can swear we were all sober to a man; not only sober, but nearly half dead with cold for the want of clothing, as, putting the storm to one side, many of our soldiers had not a shoe to their feet and their clothes were ragged as those of a beggar. I am certain not a drop of liquor was drunk during the whole night, nor, as I could see, even a piece of bread eaten, and I am willing to go upon oath that I did not see even a solitary drunken soldier belonging to the enemy, _and you will find, as I shall show, that I had an opportunity to be as good a judge as any person there.

Source 3: Thomas Paine, "The Crisis," December 23, 1776

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. (...)