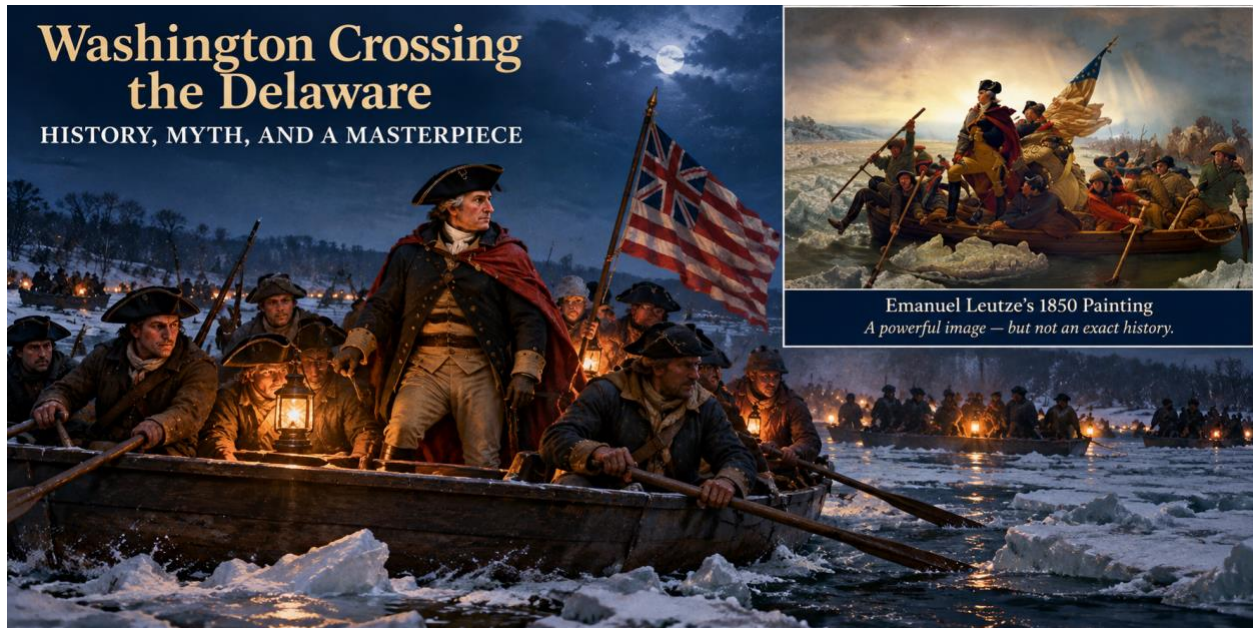




Washington Crossing the Delaware: History Behind the Masterpiece

Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* is one of the most recognizable paintings in American history. Painted in 1851, some 75 years after the event, its heroic depiction of George Washington leading his army across an ice-choked river has become almost inseparable from the story of the American Revolution itself.

The painting is not an exact reconstruction of what happened on Christmas night in 1776. Leutze took considerable artistic license with the boats, flag, lighting, uniforms and arrangement of the men. But judging the painting only by its inaccuracies misses something important. Leutze was painting history as drama, and the drama was real. Washington was about to risk his army—and perhaps the Revolution itself—on one of the boldest military gambles of the war.

After the Disaster in New York

By December 1776, Washington desperately needed a victory. The Continental Army had been badly beaten during the New York campaign and driven across New Jersey into Pennsylvania. Enlistments were expiring, morale was collapsing, and the Revolution appeared to be in serious trouble.

Washington's answer was both daring and practical. On Christmas night he would take about 2,400 men across the Delaware River, march south through miserable winter weather and surprise the Hessian troops stationed at Trenton, New Jersey. Experienced Massachusetts mariners helped ferry Washington's soldiers, horses and artillery across the river.

The real accomplishment was not a heroic pose in a boat. It was getting an army across that river at all.

Washington Standing

Leutze depicts Washington standing erect in a relatively small boat, looking resolutely toward the New Jersey shore. For generations, critics have joked that the overloaded boat would have capsized if Washington had actually attempted such a pose.

The real boats, however, were substantially larger than the one Leutze painted. Durham boats were high-sided cargo vessels designed to carry heavy loads. They had no conventional passenger seats, and Washington may indeed have stood during at least part of the crossing. The problem with Leutze's picture, therefore, is less Washington's posture than the size and type of boat surrounding him.

Washington was also only 44 years old. Leutze gives him the dignified appearance Americans associated with the older president rather than necessarily the younger general fighting for the Revolution's survival.

A Flag Ahead of Its Time

The flag in Leutze's painting is another bit of artistic license. The familiar Stars and Stripes shown billowing behind Washington was not adopted by Congress until June 1777, nearly six months after the crossing.

The young officer holding it is often identified as future president James Monroe. Monroe really did participate in the Trenton operation and was wounded in the ensuing battle, but there is no evidence that he shared Washington's boat. The painting gathers recognizable symbols and personalities into a single dramatic moment rather than attempting to document precisely who stood where.

The Real Delaware

Leutze's Delaware also looks considerably grander than the actual crossing point at McConkey's Ferry. His enormous expanse of turbulent water, dramatic ice and procession of boats makes the crossing resemble a great naval expedition.

The actual operation was more methodical—and perhaps more impressive because of it. Men, artillery, horses and supplies had to be ferried across in stages under terrible conditions. The crossing began on Christmas evening and ran hours behind schedule as snow, sleet and freezing rain complicated the operation. Washington's troops then had to march through the storm toward Trenton. A contemporary account described the night as “excessively severe.”

There was nothing picturesque about it.

Light Where There Was Darkness

Leutze illuminates the horizon with a dramatic glow, suggesting the arrival of dawn and perhaps the birth of a nation. The real crossing took place in darkness and miserable winter weather.

But here Leutze's departure from literal history serves the painting beautifully. The light is not really weather. It is metaphor. In late December 1776, the Revolution badly needed some light.

What Leutze Got Exactly Right

Washington was no “sunshine patriot.” After getting, in less dignified terms, our butts kicked by the British in New York, he did not wait passively for better circumstances. He recognized that his army needed a victory and devised an operation that used surprise, timing and determination to compensate for British superiority.

The plan worked. Washington's troops surprised the Hessian garrison at Trenton on December 26 and won a badly needed victory. The military importance of Trenton exceeded the size of the battle itself. The victory restored morale and demonstrated that the Continental Army was still capable of fighting—and winning. Historians describe the attack as a turning point in the Revolutionary War.

That is why Leutze's painting deserves something better than a list of historical mistakes. He was not painting a photograph of the Delaware River on December 25, 1776. He was painting what the moment came to mean.

His Washington stands because the Revolution itself had to stand. The light breaks through because the American cause had survived one of its darkest moments. And the little boat presses forward because Washington had decided that retreat could no longer save his army.

Leutze may not have painted the crossing exactly as it happened. He painted why it mattered.