

Americanism

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Washington at the Delaware

We have all seen the famous painting of a bold and confident George Washington standing bravely in a small boat, crossing the Delaware River with his Continental Army. It has stirred patriotic emotions in us for years, but how exactly did this crossing take place successfully?

At the time of the crossing, Washington's army had experienced a series of military defeats, and troop morale was at an all-time low. As the harsh Pennsylvania winter ensued, the soldiers lacked both food and warm clothing, and the army was shrinking due to expiring enlistments and desertions. Washington desperately needed a victory.

Washington organized a surprise attack on a well-trained garrison of about 1,400 Hessians, or German mercenary soldiers, who were situated around Trenton, New Jersey. After several councils of war, he set the date for the crossing of the Delaware River with about 2,400 Continental soldiers for Christmas night, 1776.

The plan was to cross three separate groups over the river, but two groups were unable to cross successfully. Only Washington's main group made it across, but it was more than three hours delayed.

None of the Continental soldiers knew anything about their upcoming mission; Washington kept all details of the crossing secret. On Christmas morning 1776, the soldiers awoke to frozen, snow-covered ground. In late afternoon, they gathered along the river, following Washington's orders. The plan was to begin crossing immediately after nightfall, complete the crossing by midnight, reassemble, and march ten miles to Trenton, arriving there no later than 5 am, to surprise the Hessians in battle.

However, things did not go as planned. Many of the regiments did not arrive at the river until well after dark, and a severe winter storm of wind, rain, snow, hail, and sleet ensued at the riverbank, slowing the crossing. The boats had to maneuver through ice jams and river currents, and the extreme night darkness made it hard for the boatmen to see the opposite shore.

So, how did Washington secure the boats necessary for the Delaware River crossing? And who were these skilled boatmen who led the army across?

In preparation for the crossing, the New Jersey Continental militia had gathered all available watercraft to the banks of the river and secured them. Thus, the British would not be able to access them, and they would be used by the American soldiers when they completed the mission and re-crossed the river to safety.

About 20 strongly built cargo vessels, called Durham boats, transported the soldiers across the river. Each Durham boat was 60 feet long, 6 feet wide, and 3 feet deep, with a flat bottom and high sides. With both the front and stern pointed at the ends, they were propelled along the shoreline by maneuvering steel tipped poles into the riverbed. Oars were used in the deeper water in the middle of the river.

An oarsman would go across the river, simply turn around in the boat, and run it back across the river with ease. There were numerous Durham boats around the Trenton landings, used daily for transporting heavy iron ore and bulk goods downriver to markets in and around Philadelphia. The patriot soldiers simply commandeered them for the mission, and hid them along the river until the night they were needed.

Oh, but wait. Unbelievably, the soldiers also transported heavy artillery and 50 horses across the river that night. Washington and his army needed the extra firepower so, over the river at a ferry location, came 18 cannons, some weighing as much as 1,750 pounds. They also moved enough ammunition for the coming battle, as well as the horses needed to pull the artillery carriages. For this endeavor, simple flat-bottomed ferries were used, probably fixed to a wire stretched across the river.

Fortunately, the area where General Washington and his army crossed was rather narrow, only about 300 yards wide. No one died during the crossing, not even one of the skittish and terrified horses.

And who were the skilled boatmen who transported the soldiers and equipment safely across? Washington relied on nearly 500 men in the Marblehead Regiment from Massachusetts, under the command of Colonel John Glover. Most of Glover's men were seamen, mariners, and fishermen from the New England maritime shores. Glover himself was a successful seaman and international merchant who owned his own ship.

When Washington asked Glover whether his daring plan to cross the Delaware at night was even imaginable, much less doable, Glover confidently replied, "You need not be troubled about that, General; my boys can handle that." And they did. The indispensable so-called "Marbleheaders" are the unsung heroes of the crossing.

General Washington updated John Hancock and the Continental Congress in a letter dated December 27, 1776. In it, he wrote, "Sir: I have the pleasure of congratulating you upon the success of an enterprise ... against a detachment of the enemy lying in Trenton ... which was executed [or in modern language "completed"] yesterday morning."

Humbly describing his military achievement in the letter, Washington wrote, "As I was certain there was no making a retreat without being discovered... I determined to push on at all [costs]."

What an inspiring feat Washington and his Continental Army accomplished! We are indeed blessed to live in this country. Thank you for listening, and God bless America.

--Karen Blanco

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