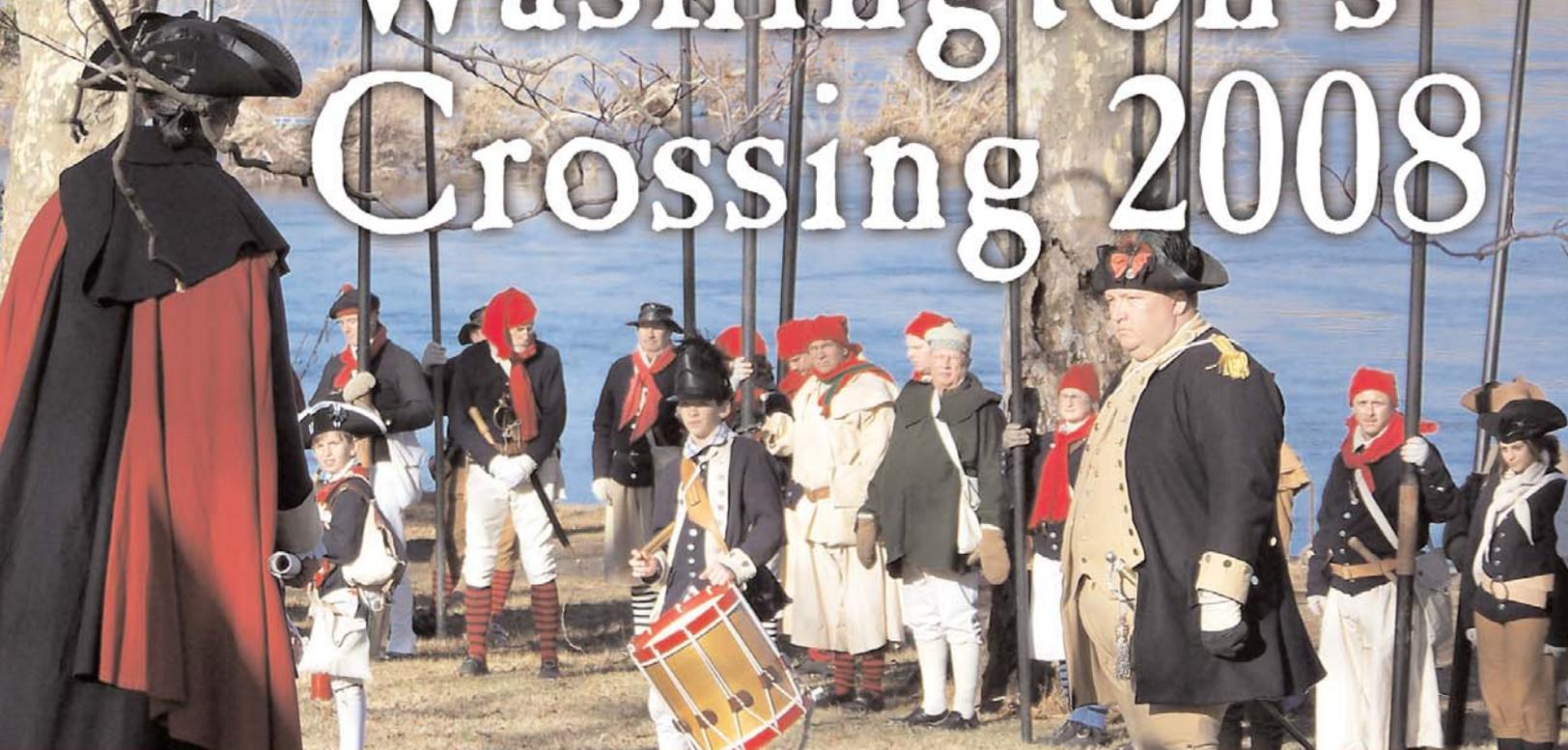


# Washington's Crossing 2008



Event photos by the author.

It was a clear, rather mild day as we gathered with the thick crowds assembled along the rope-line on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware River - much different from the weather on the day of the event being recalled - for the 56th reenactment of Washington's crossing of the Delaware before the pivotal Battle of Trenton.

Ronald Rinaldi, portraying General Washington, addressed the fifty or so "troops." As I strained to hear the amplified words, I closed my eyes for a moment and tried to really immerse myself in the moment—no crowds of civilians, no barking dogs, no modern bridge, no media, not even a bright blue sky or a warm day—instead I tried to imagine the some 2,400 beleaguered, scared, hungry, weary men and boys longing for home, shivering in the cold sleet and snow,

## A Commentary by Gordon Bond



being entreated to risk life and limb just one more time for a cause that seemed as good as lost.

And then I opened my eyes again and glanced over the crowd—just in time to see a young woman texting on her cell phone. The moment was lost on her.

Sigh.

True, such youthful ambivalence was the exception in the crowd as digital and cell-phone cameras were held aloft to record this touristy spectacle. But it struck me that whatever one thinks of reenactments as history, traditions such as this are really a bulwark against allowing the very real drama of that Christmas Day in 1776 slide into pop-culture quaintness. If one enters into the spirit of the thing, it is perhaps possible, for a fleeting moment, to viscerally feel what those

men might have felt as they strained to hear their General's words. It is that human element that transcends the dull dates and monotonous laundry lists of facts from public school history books.

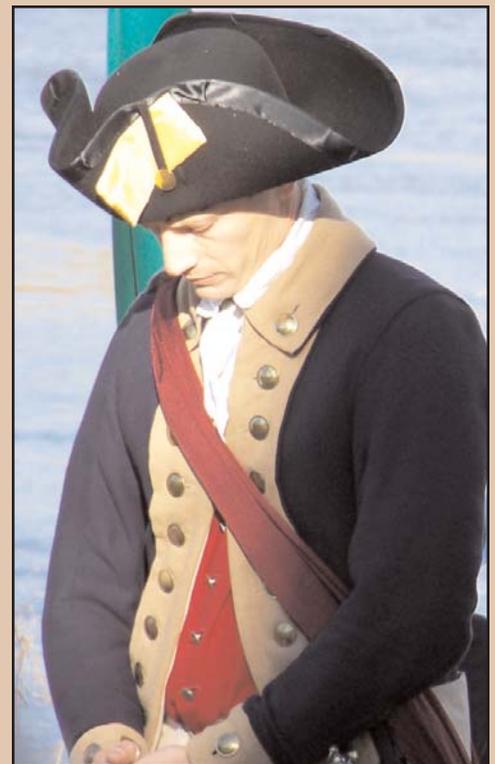
As anyone who has given our history more than a perfunctory glance knows, the real stories are often more amazing than our melodramatic creation myths. The crossing of Washington and his troops over the Delaware River on the way to the Battle of Trenton is a tale that has been told and retold many times, with varying degrees of detail and accuracy. Yet even a brief account of the main salient facts demonstrates that this is one of those amazing real life stories.

A mere five months since officially declaring to the world their intended independence from Great Britain, those who chose to throw their support behind the rebels were beginning to have second thoughts. The American army under General George Washington had been soundly thrashed by Hessian forces sent by the British to capture Forts Mifflin and Red Bank in New York, forcing Washington's army clear across New Jersey. Indeed, about the only thing that stopped a British assault on Philadelphia was the onset of winter. In

the sport that was 18th century warfare, the promise of inclement weather caused most armies to withdraw from the field and settle into "winter quarters" to rest, re-supply and plan for the next season's campaigns.

The British, holed up in Tory New York with its port close at hand, could afford to be patient. Washington had no such luxury. After losing two forts, Congress, his men and the public were quickly losing faith in the viability of the cause and the competence of the good General from Virginia. Seizing boats along the Delaware (including the fabled Durhams), the ragged American army slipped across the Delaware into Pennsylvania. Short on supplies (they abandoned most of those in New York) and without funds to pay his men, he faced the disintegration of his army from a combination of desertions and the expiration of enlistments at year's end. Washington simply couldn't sit still.

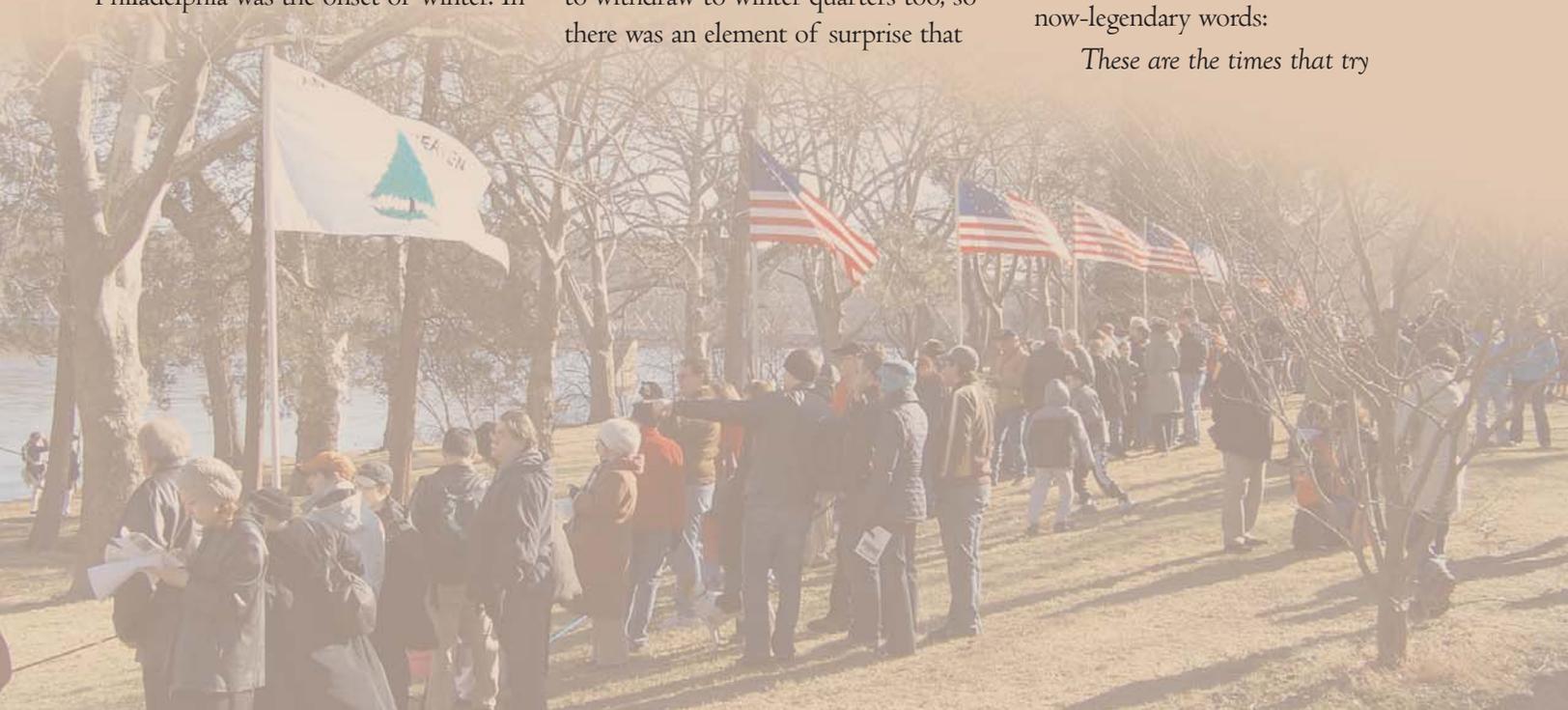
His opportunity for action came in the form of the Hessian units garrisoned just outside of Trenton to cover the British fallback to New York. They would be expecting the Americans to withdraw to winter quarters too, so there was an element of surprise that



might be exploited.

Still, he needed to convince his men that their cause was yet worth fighting for. Inspiration came from *The American Crisis*, the first of a series of pamphlets penned by Thomas Paine, occasioned by the disheartening retreat from Fort Mifflin. It was read to the men, hoping to raise in them a patriotic zeal to stay on and fight. It opened with the now-legendary words:

*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 his country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.*

Washington fed their desire for revenge, reminding them that the hated Hessians who had embarrassed them and visited atrocities on soldiers and civilians alike were to be their target. He claimed for them a moral high ground, that they were not the aggressors but defending their homes:

*God Almighty will not give up a people to military destruction, or leave them unsupportedly to*

*perish, who have so earnestly and so repeatedly sought to avoid the calamities of war, by every decent method which wisdom could invent.*

Still, they must have questioned if their deity really smiled upon them as a nor'easter storm closed in while preparing for the attack, pelting them with sleet and freezing rain. They were reminded by Paine's words that "Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph."

So, at 4:00 pm on December 25, 1776, in driving snow and sleet, they began piling onto the Durham boats to begin the long process of ferrying some 2,400 men, 18 cannons, as many as 75 horses and all the needed supplies across a Delaware River swollen with ice flows. It took longer than anticipated (losing the cover of dark Washington hoped to exploit), but twelve hours later all were back in New Jersey for the six mile march to Trenton. It is evidently not hyperbole to note that many men had bound their feet in burlap, their shoes worn to nothing, and left bloody prints in the white snow.

The attack itself went flawlessly.



Twenty-two Hessians were killed (including their two Generals) and 83 were seriously injured. Only two Americans died and five were injured. They sent 896 Hessian prisoners back to Pennsylvania.

The tactical importance of what became known as the Battle of Trenton is subject to debate in strictly military terms. Psychologically, however, it was priceless. Faith was restored among both the troops and the Congress in Washington's martial prowess and his





ability as a leader of men. The more substantial victory at the Battle of Princeton on January 3, 1777 was due, in part, to the reinvigoration of faith that the struggle might just be winnable after all.

Indeed, after war's end, none other than Washington's foe, the British General Cornwallis, considered what happened on the banks of the Delaware to have been Washington's finest hour.

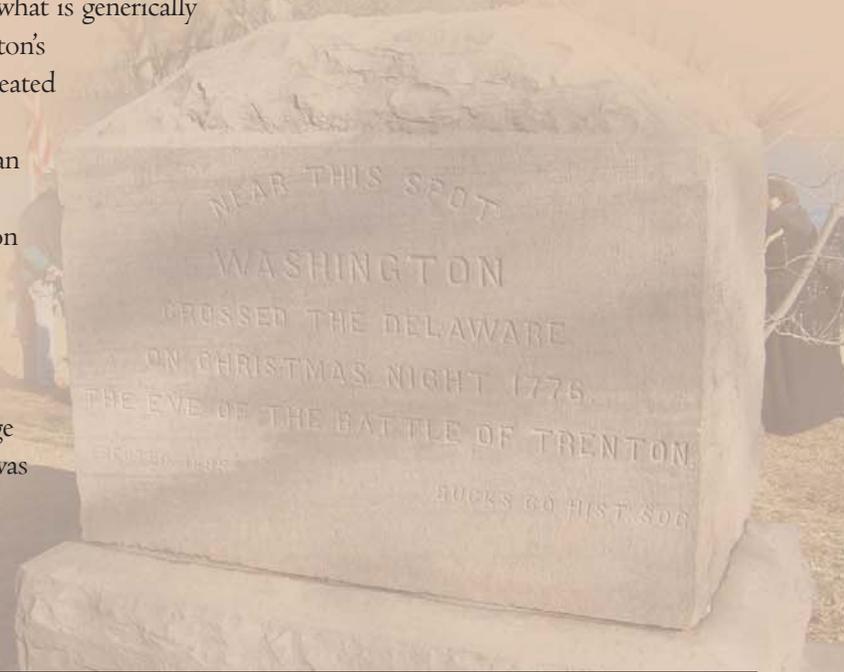
The image of these frozen men, inspired by stirring words, making one last effort to rescue the American cause is breathtaking. It seems tailor-made for the heroic creation myths of the new nation's noble self-image. Yet, even here, some felt the need to embellish the tale in the retelling. One odd rumor was that the Hessians were easily taken because they were all passed out in drunken stupors from overly enthusiastic Christmas celebrations. It seems a strange polish to put on the story, in that the American troops beating an unconscious enemy, seems less than sporting nor nearly as impressive! Yet it

was likely an attempt to portray the Hessians as barbarous sots who fell thanks to their own base dissipation. In any case, contemporary evidence suggests the Hessians were in no way drunk or passed out. They slept with their muskets and, if they were at all drowsy, it was more likely the effects of the bitter cold than any liquid spirits.

Perhaps the most widely recognized iconic image of what is generically called "Washington's Crossing" was created in 1851 by the German American Artist Emanuel Leutze. His oil on canvas painting, "Washington Crossing the Delaware," has become *the* image of the event. It was even selected to represent New Jersey as a whole on the "state

quarter" coin.

There are problems with historical accuracy, however, which was sacrificed to artistic license. The crossing actually took place at night, for one. The flag being hoisted by Lieutenant James Monroe (a future President of the United States) wouldn't



be designed for another six months. Then there's the boat itself—it's not modeled on the type used and probably would be far too small to carry that many people. And, of course, there's George Washington himself. His pose is certainly heroic, but many argue he could never have stood on a boat being rocked by a raging, ice-laden river. Others, however, have proposed that the boats would have taken on at least some frozen water, making sitting an even less comfortable option.

Of course, Leutze was an artist, not an historian. He wasn't really trying to create a "snapshot" of the event, but rather capture the heroic spirit in a popular style of the day. Nevertheless, it has helped to solidify the event in the pantheon of great moments in American history. By 1917, the spots on either side of the river were set aside as Washington Crossing Historic Park. In addition to marking the geographic

location, some of the 18th and 19th century buildings have been preserved and an interpretive center established. Over the years, the Park has been expanded to include some 500 acres of recreational parkland and nature preserves.



A reenactment of the crossing has been conducted every Christmas Day since 1952. It is often a mostly symbolic gesture, as when conditions on the Delaware River are too hazardous, the participants

simply march across the bridge linking Pennsylvania to New Jersey—a bridge Washington and his men would likely have given a king's ransom to have had! When Mother Nature cooperates, however, the company does indeed float across in faithfully reproduced Durham boats. Of course, even when all goes right, it's still just a shadow of what the real crossing must have been like in

terms of the sheer numbers of men and material that needed to be ferried under punishing conditions.

This Christmas tradition is one I have wanted to experience for some time, and finally got to in 2008. We stayed Christmas Eve in Lambertville on the New Jersey side and on the drive down from Union, NJ, it poured with rain. Fortunately, this gave way to a clear and rather mild next day. However, the rains plus the snowmelt caused the river to run too high and fast to risk a crossing. Instead, the troops marched across the bridge to applause and even a few proper "huzahs!"



Trying to get a sense of what the real crossing was like took some imagination. However, by inspiring the public to even think about it at all, this wonderful tradition has served its purpose—and, for myself anyway, it engendered a greater appreciation for the individuals who heeded Washington's pleadings and stepped into the boats on the ice-filled Delaware. 



# “My brave fellows...”

Washington's address  
to his troops.

My brave fellows. On our recent march through Jersey from New York, one of our own, Thomas Paine, aide-de-camp to Gen'l Greene, penned by firelight a tract which captures the essence of our present situation. Permit me to share with you a few lines...

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and sunshine patriot, will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country, but he that stands 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 everything 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.

Men, Your conduct during this recent campaign has been most commendable. You have sacrificed much for your country and brought much honor upon yourselves. I assure you that I am not insensible to the needs that you have and hardships we are enduring. We are indeed distressed beyond measure for clothing and other articles. Tents, blankets, flints, powder, cooking pots and food are in short supply. Our force is small and our defensive positions along the banks of

the Delaware stretched thinly and quite exposed and vulnerable. About all of this I have made further mention to Congress and have pressed them for relief with all possible dispatch. I trust these matters will meet their earliest attention. As for this moment, I fear, we face a more critical and alarming situation...

You, the officers and men of this American Army must remember that you are free men fighting for the blessings of liberty. It is a great stake we are playing for. Every virtuous citizen is depending on you to rid this land of the ministerial troops that have brought wanton destruction to its shores and is attempting to enslave America. The time is now near at hand which will probably determine whether Americans are to be freemen or slaves, whether they are to have any property they can call their own, or whether their houses and farms are to be pillaged and destroyed and they consigned to a state of wretchedness from which they cannot be delivered. Our cruel and unrelenting Enemy leaves us no choice but a brave resistance or the most abject submission.

Men, you are assembled here for tonight we cross back into JERSEY. Those of you who stood with me at Long Island and on the battlefields around the environs of New York, I entreat you to remember those actions. Those of you who have since joined our ranks from General Schyler's army up north, I beseech you to listen carefully... Across that river not 10 miles distant in the town of Trenton and just beyond in Bordentown are posted the same regiments of base hirelings and mercenaries that attacked us at Brooklyn Heights and White Plains. The same Hessian mercenaries

that spared not the bayonet and showed no quarter to many a brave American soldier who fell on those fields of battle. The same slavish mercenaries that imprisoned hundreds of your fellow soldiers, captured at Fort Mifflin, on royal prison ships in New York Harbor. Those same mercenaries hired by the Ministry then pillaged and plundered the good citizens of Jersey. And those same mercenaries WILL...as soon as this river freezes over, march across and carry those atrocities here to Pennsylvania and throughout the rest of these United States should we let them.

Tonight, our mission, our duty as a free people, is to stem the tide of these atrocities, to retake what is rightfully ours and rid this great land of the plague of the mercenaries, and those who brought them to our shores. At this fateful hour the eyes of all our countrymen are now upon us. The eyes of the world are watching. Let us show them all that a freeman contending for Liberty on his own ground is superior to any slavish mercenary on earth.

Yes Men, Tonight we cross back into Jersey. I beseech you all, remain close to your officers. They are good men. Heed their commands. On the march south a profound silence is to be enjoined and reflect upon what we owe those mercenaries. And when the hour is upon us fight for all that you are worth and all that you cherish and love. The fate of unborn millions will now depend, under God, on the courage and conduct that you show. The watch word is VICTORY OR DEATH -- For I am resolved that by dawn both Trenton and Victory shall be ours.

<http://www.ushistory.org/WashingtonCrossing/reenactment/index.htm>