

Student Handout 2: Descriptions of Washington Crossing the Delaware

Washington's plan of attack envisioned several columns that would cross the Delaware at different places and make Trenton into a trap by simultaneously blocking all the roads....The main army of twenty-four hundred would have crossed the Delaware at McKonkey's Ferry, some nine miles upriver....The whole maneuver was to start on Christmas Day, when the Hessians would probably not be paying much attention, and before patriot enlistments had run out.

On Christmas Day, Washington led his main detachment upriver far enough inland so that they would be invisible to enemy lookouts. They halted behind low hills, and then, as dark blotted out the enemy shore, advanced to McKonkey's Ferry, where they were met by large cargo boats which had just emerged from hiding up creeks and under overhanging foliage. These "Durham" boats, named after their maker, had been especially designed for ferrying goods across the Delaware. Shaped like huge canoes-forty to sixty feet long, but only eight feet wide- they were doubled-ended and they drew not more than two feet, even when carrying loads of fifteen tons. Along the gunwales ran narrow promenades, since the method of propulsion was for men to stand at the bows, firmly establish poles in the bed of the shallow river, and then walk to the stern, pushing the vessel forward. Because a pole against the river bottom gives more purchase than oars, this was, before steam power, a common expedient for fighting strong currents.

The air was chilly, discouragingly damp with a foretaste of storm, but the wind was still moderate....Then the wind stiffened, bringing a terrible cold that formed ice in the shallows: a man would turn to scratch himself, and when he looked back sheet ice was a full foot further out in the river. The soldiers had to break through the crust to get to the boats, and, as soon as their clothing became wet, it froze as solid as armor. When the wind made the boats lurch, unshod horses slithered and beat with their hoofs to regain their footing. The men, pushing on the poles they had pressed against the river bottom, had difficulty balancing on their narrow decks, all the more so because as they walked they had to avoid the sticks with which other men were trying to ward off the floating cakes of ice that augmented dangerously with the freeze. The going became slower and slower.

According to the timetable on which cooperation between the various attacks depended, Washington's army should be across by midnight; but at midnight the laborious ferrying was still in full swing. Then it was three in the morning and the artillery was not yet over. Not till four was the whole detachment huddled on the Jersey shore.

Text adapted from the following textbook:

James Thomas Flexner, *George Washington in the American Revolution (1775-1783)* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 173-174.