

Washington Crossing Rhine, Not Delaware

Leutze's Famous Painting Really Represents the German River, and German Soldiers Were Used as Models—American Pupil Aided Artist to Get Proper Uniforms

By Dr. BERNARD J. CIGRAND.

EVERY student of American history knows that General Washington and his army crossed the Delaware. But if we are to believe the correspondence of the late Eastman Johnson, famous American artist and a pupil of Emanuel Leutze, who painted "Washington Crossing the Delaware," then Washington is portrayed not as crossing the Delaware, but as crossing the Rhine.

Mrs. Johnson possesses some remarkable letters about the painting which now hangs in the Metropolitan Museum, New York City. In reproductions it is probably better known to Americans than any other historical picture.

Leutze actually painted the picture on the banks of the Rhine, and German soldiers posed for the leading figures.

Some years ago, while visiting Germany, I journeyed to the old home-
stead of the artist who gave us the picture of one of the telling victories of the American Revolution. The keeper of the old place told me that Leutze came to Düsseldorf in 1841, and not long afterward he began the picture of "Washington Crossing the Delaware." I was told that the artist sat on the banks of the Rhine and for many days made a careful study of the flow of the stream and outlined its banks. He also made close studies of the figures for his painting, and particularly of Washington's face.

Then, when the Springtime came, and while the Rhine was choked with ice, he

sketched the river's bank and the cakes of ice as they were tossed about by wind and torrent. Hence our famous picture portrays an ice jam on the Rhine and not on the Delaware River, and the entire atmosphere is of German character. German types of faces are to be seen. The man who is holding the flag in the picture looks much like Frederick the Great.

These German soldier models were attired in American Continental Army uniforms. It was young Eastman John-

son's task to see that they were true in detail to history. Johnson wrote to our Congress for assistance, and a committee was appointed to afford Leutze and Johnson every service possible.

When I returned to America I was anxious to learn more about the painting and wrote several letters to Mrs. Eastman Johnson. She sent me many interesting details of her husband's serv-

ice to Leutze as well as about his own contribution to historic American paintings. It was Johnson who gave us the picture, "Lincoln's Boyhood." He also painted Daniel Webster. Mrs. Johnson's story slightly corrected what the keeper told me, though in the main it corroborated what he said.

To secure accuracy in the costumes Mr. Johnson wrote home to his father, asking him to have made a careful reproduction of the uniform worn by Washington, which was done, and the garments were

Christmas night, 1776, the Colonies did not possess a flag of "Stars and Stripes," and that in portraying a flag with stars the canvas failed to record the truth, for at this date the Continental flag was of thirteen stripes, alternate red and white, with the crosses of St. George and St. Andrew.

The picture decorates more homes, schools, and colleges than any group historical picture we possess, and it is to be regretted that it contains the flag error.

Another popular error with regard to this picture is that many of our American books of history and art speak of Leutze as a native American, when the truth is he was born in Württemberg, Germany, on May 24, 1816. He was brought to America when an infant. Later he became so thoroughly interested in American affairs that he chose to portray scenes and events related to American history. His "Columbus Before the Council," "Columbus in Chains," "Columbus Before the Queen," "Columbus Discovers America," his "Norsemen Landing in America," "Washington at Princeton," "Lafayette in Prison,"

and other paintings make his name known to all America.

There is no doubt that Leutze was inspired by an admiration of American institutions, and it may turn out that there was something oddly prophetic in his using the Rhine background for his famous picture—that is, that the spirit of Washington, in making democracy safe for the world, will yet cross the Rhine.



Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Leutze's "Washington Crossing the Delaware," Famous Historical Painting in New York, Shows the River Rhine.

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forwarded to Leutze. Johnson in a letter home records that at the reception held in Leutze's studio in May, 1851, the Prince and the Princess of Prussia were among the distinguished guests.

The American flag was evidently shipped to Leutze also, but in this case the painter, as well as his young pupil, overlooked the fact that at the time Washington crossed the Delaware,