

# *Washington's Crossing*

by David Hackett Fischer

Oxford University Press

## A Reading and Discussion Guide

Prepared by Ruth M. LaFrance  
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### **SUMMARY:**

*Excerpted from Editor's Note by James M. McPherson (page x)*

*Washington's Crossing* is a vivid narrative of a military campaign that shaped the future not only of America, but also of the world. David Hackett Fischer has written much more than a military narrative, however. He sets the story in the social and political context of a major transformation in the history of the Western world. The American Revolution pitted an amateur army fighting for a new order of liberty and independence against two professional armies (British and Hessian) defending an old order of hierarchy and discipline. Until Washington crossed the Delaware, the triumph of the old order seemed inevitable. Thereafter, things would never be the same.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. "The story of their friendship [William Leslie and William Rush] reminds us why so many Britons and Americans thought of the Revolution as a civil war." (page 311)

Using the American-British conflict as a starting point, define revolution and civil war. Which term most aptly applies to this war? Carry your definitions further by fitting one or the other term to the French Revolution, the American Civil War, the Korean War, Vietnam, and Chechnya. Defend your choice of term.

2. The British brought their own army to North America and rented the Hessian army. Why didn't they enlist American loyalists? What differences in the war might have occurred if a significant number of loyalists had been engaged to fight alongside the British soldiers?
3. Several times throughout his narrative, Fischer mentions sympathy for the American cause among British officers and soldiers. What effect might this ambiguity have had on the prosecution of the war? Is there evidence to suggest short or long term consequences?

4. How did colonial life prepare Washington and his army for the adaptations necessary to successfully fight the British and Hessian armies?
5. George Washington accommodated the differences among his soldiers and their officers to great advantage. Reflect on how the integration of the diverse elements of his army affected: a) the course of the war and b) the establishment of a country from thirteen very different colonies.
6. The concept of liberty was not the same for all elements of Washington's army. Review the ways in which the American soldiery viewed liberty. Discuss how these different views have survived or not to the present day.
7. "He [Washington] often reminded his men that they were an army of liberty and freedom, and that the rights of humanity for which they were fighting should extend even to their enemies." (page 276)

How did Washington use words to apply his concept of humanity? How did Washington's orders differ from those of his enemy counterparts? What were the results of these differences? To what extent did this policy of humanity extend within the fledgling American government?

8. Describe the ways in which Washington's crossing of the Delaware and the subsequent victory at Trenton and then Princeton marked a turning point in the war.

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

Excerpted from: [http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2004\\_dhfischer.htm](http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2004_dhfischer.htm)

A professor at Brandeis University, David Hackett Fischer is the author of several noted books on history, including *Bound Away: Virginia and the Westward Movement*, *The Great Wave: Price Movements in Modern History*, *Paul Revere's Ride*, and *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*. He is co-editor, with James M. McPherson, of the *Pivotal Moments in American History* series published by Oxford University press. A graduate of Princeton and Johns Hopkins Universities, he divides his time between homes in Massachusetts and Maine.

### **HELPFUL LINKS:**

<http://www.amrev.org/htdocs/html/fm/CARSTOC.shtml> Annotated list of places of interest from The Council of American Revolutionary Sites (CARS).

<http://www.loc.gov> Library of Congress home page

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gwthml/gwhome.html> George Washington Papers

The Library of Congress is an excellent source of documents. The site “George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress 1741-1799” is of special interest in the context of Fischer’s book.

<http://www.barracks.org/general/links2.htm> The Old Barracks Museum maintains a website with a page devoted to links of Revolutionary era interest.

<http://www.state.nj.us/travel/virtual/tendays> Washington Crossing State Park is located at the site where Washington and his troops landed after crossing the Delaware River on Christmas night 1776.

### **RECENTLY PUBLISHED TITLES OF INTEREST:**

Ellis, Joseph J. *His Excellency: George Washington*. Knopf Publishing Groups, 2004.

Fischer, David Hackett. *Liberty and Freedom: A Visual History of America’s Founding Ideas*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

McCullough, David. *1776*. Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, 2005.

Nash, Gary B. *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America*. Viking Adult, 2004.

Schiff, Stacy. *A Great Improvisation: Franklin, France, and the Birth of America*. Henry Holt & Company, 2005.



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