

THE BATTLES OF TRENTON AND  
PRINCETON

AS PICTURED BY ARTISTS

BY

LIEUT.-COLONEL WILLIAM E. PEDRICK

Member Fellowship, Pennsylvania Academy  
of the Fine Arts

---

An address delivered before  
The Trenton Historical Society  
January 18, 1923

---

1925  
THE TRENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
TRENTON, NEW JERSEY

J 974.966  
P 371  
c2

—  
PRESS OF  
STATE GAZETTE PUBLISHING CO.  
—

NEW JERSEY STATE LIBRARY

## THE BATTLES OF TRENTON AND PRINCETON

AS PICTURED BY ARTISTS

There are so many pictures, chiefly engravings and book illustrations, of incidents connected with the Revolution, many reproduced from paintings, that at first thought it would appear there might be found among them quite a number depicting such important events as the battles of Trenton and Princeton, but a review of all those of which I have any knowledge shows comparatively few outstanding works in which capable artists have rendered scenes of these two notable battles. Some of the early steel engravings and a greater number of book illustrations are reproductions of drawings made by unskilled artists, who only picture distorted anatomy and impossible scenery and are not worthy of comment. In the better pictures we might reasonably expect to find an attempt, at least, to render the scenes true to their subjects, and in the more important works correct rendition of detail in the landscape and accessory objects of historical import. But even the painters who produced their pictures during the time when so many of the participants in the events portrayed were still living and could have supplied descriptive data, and while the sites of the battle grounds were in much the same condition as when the battles were fought, do not appear to have thought it worth while to note details of the scenes with the accuracy which the majority of us today consider essential to pictures of this character.

Artists of our own time, when painting historical subjects, and there are more than a few who love to treat subjects of the revolutionary period, often go to extreme trouble to acquire material and information to make their pictures conform as near as possible to absolute historical truth.

We do, however, occasionally see a beautiful picture, the product of a famous painter's brush, which shows utter disregard of important facts.

For example, I recall a picture recently painted by an artist of international fame as a painter of colonial and revolutionary subjects. The picture represents an incident connected with the battle of Trenton. It shows the advance of Greene's Column, on the Pennington road, as it arrived in the early morning in the vicinity of the village. The incident shown in the painting is described in Irving's *Life of Washington*, as follows:

"As they approached the village Washington, who was in front, came to a man that was chopping wood by the roadside and inquired, 'Which way is the Hessian picket?'"

"I don't know," was the surly reply.

"You may tell," said Captain Forrest, of the artillery, "for that is General Washington."

The aspect of the man changed in an instant. Raising his hands to Heaven, "God bless and prosper you," cried he; "the picket is in that house and the sentry stands near the tree."

It is a most attractive picture and, judging it alone as such, is a fine work of art. Washington is depicted at the head of the column in conversation with the woodchopper who is pointing to the picket post. The troops following him are seen in perspective on the road. There is snow on the ground but no other evidence of storm. A number of inaccurate details appear in the painting, but to the historian, or to any one who visualizes the incident (if it ever happened), if he is familiar with the history of that march to Trenton in the early winter morning, the most glaring error in the picture is the sun rising—and rising in the west! From the same book which gave him an account of the incident the artist may have learned the weather conditions of that twenty-sixth day of December, 1776, at a quarter to eight o'clock in the morning. But the rising sun gives the picture a wonderfully pleasing effect and the painter was more interested in that phase of his work than in the mere matter of recording historical fact. The incident offered a subject for painting a patriotic theme, the sunlit sky adds beautiful color, the combination produces a most attractive picture and why should he trouble

about a matter of so little consequence (to the painter) as accuracy of historical detail?

It may be surprising to some of you that the painter of an historical subject would not concern himself about the correctness of even the smallest detail of his picture, but in working on the setting for an historical incident it is possible for an artist to adapt the scene to his own imagination of the way it should look, rather than render it as history says it actually did appear. In other words, to make a grand composition, with good drawing and attractive color; a picture that will stir the emotions, appeal to a sense of appreciation for the beautiful, the grand or the tragic, is his main objective. And in his effort to accomplish this he does not hesitate to sacrifice accuracy of detail if such detail interferes with his conception of pictorial effect. While this may not apply to the modern artists as a rule, it may possibly make plain to you why such an error as that in the picture I have just criticized can occur, and it undoubtedly explains the reason for another artist's disregard of anything pertaining to accuracy of historical detail in that most famous of all paintings dealing with incidents connected with the battle of Trenton, Leutze's Washington Crossing the Delaware.

I will venture the assertion that there is scarcely a person, born and educated in the United States, who has not seen a reproduction in one form or another of this wonderfully popular picture, and all those who have read any account of the event itself know how false it is as a record of the scene depicted. The painting, however, is a grand composition and a most inspiring work of art, in spite of the fact that there is but one possibly correct historical detail in the picture.

Emanuel Leutze was born in Germany in 1816. His parents emigrated to the United States while he was an infant and settled in Philadelphia. In 1841 he went to Dusseldorf to study under the great German artist, Lessing, and it is said that his Washington Crossing the Delaware was painted while he was in that country; that the figure of Washington was painted from a German model and that Germans also served as models for the soldiers shown in the boat.

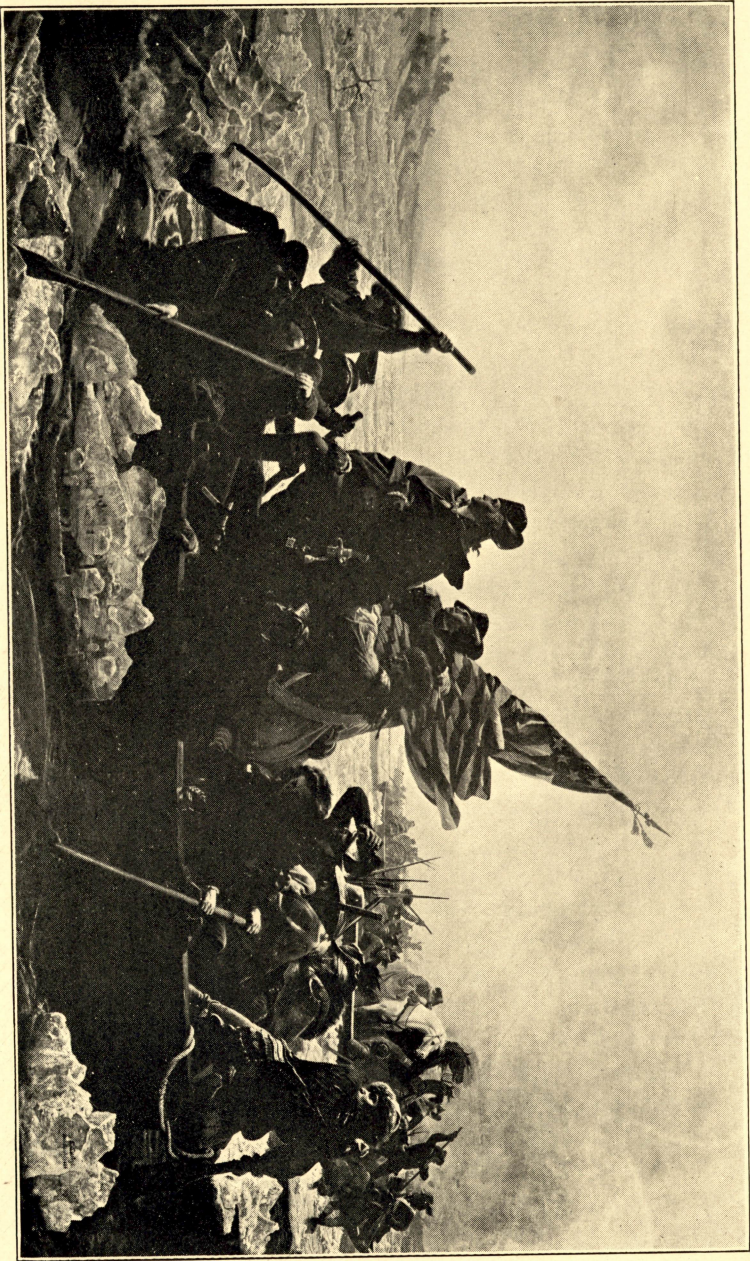
Whether or not this is so, it is nevertheless true that the artist has apparently made no attempt to show the incident in its proper historical setting. The crossing was made on a dark, stormy night, the air was intensely cold and filled with sleet and hail, mingled with snow. General Stryker in his history of the battles of Trenton and Princeton says:

"All day Monday and Tuesday the Delaware River was clear of ice, but before noon on Wednesday, the 25th, it was full of floating cakes of ice, not very thick, however, from some of its upper branches, which had been frozen by the intense cold of December 20."

Although a part of the sky is dark and the moon is shown, Leutze's painting has the appearance of broad daylight, without a sign of storm. The ice is very thick and in the middle distance several men are seen pushing one of the boats clear while standing on a large floe. The ice is either floating up river or else the boat is headed toward the Pennsylvania shore. The flag, with stars and stripes as shown so conspicuously in the picture, was not designed until several months after the battle of Trenton, and Washington, instead of crossing in a crowded boat, was rowed across the river, with General Knox, by a Pennsylvania farmer in a small boat.

Still, notwithstanding all its inaccuracies the picture has become one of the most famous of all historical paintings, and there is scarcely an illustrated history of the Revolution which does not contain a reproduction. Even in recent publications it has been used in preference to drawings which more correctly represent the scene.

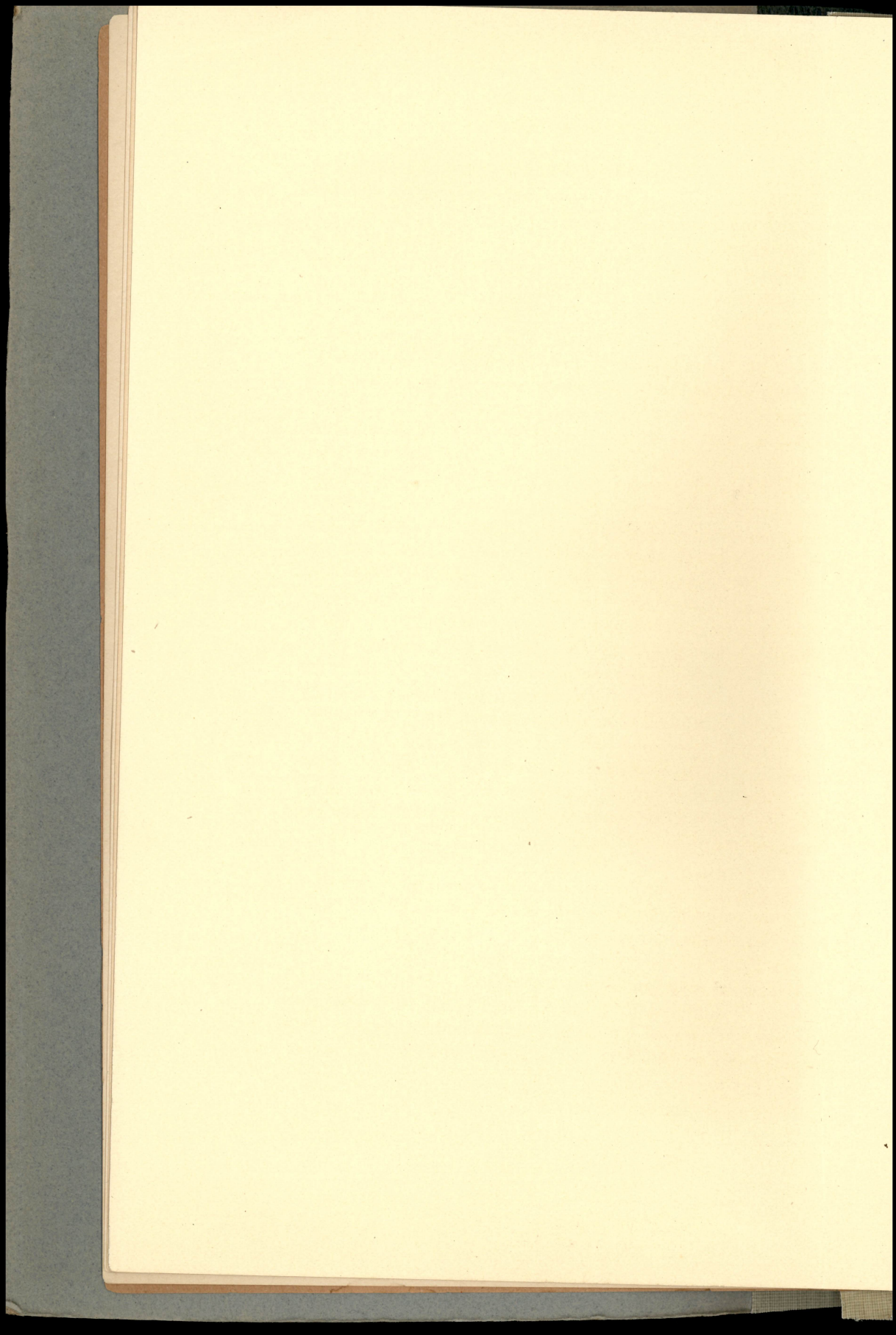
After Leutze's picture the best known painting of the crossing is that of Thomas Sully, a distinguished Philadelphia artist, born in 1783. This painter also represents or misrepresents the crossing by daylight, for although the sky is dark, the river and opposite shore can be seen for a much greater distance than would be possible on even the brightest of moonlight nights. Referring to General Stryker's history again we find this statement on page 130: "As soon as it became dark the troops came down to the river bank, ready to pass over. General Washington, who was on horseback, eagerly watched the boats as they pushed off one by one,



WASHINGTON CROSSING THE DELAWARE

LEUTZ'S PAINTING

IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



freighted with men who were to strike a desperate blow for the liberty of their country, or receive a crushing defeat from their hireling foes."

Washington, mounted on a white horse, is shown on the Pennsylvania shore watching the embarking of his troops. Washington's horse is usually pictured as a white one but we know, from the letter of an eyewitness, that he rode a sorrel chestnut horse at the battle of Trenton. Therefore, as it is not probable he changed mounts between the time the troops embarked and the battle, the white horse in Sully's picture is an error. In Stryker's history, page 160, we find the following: "There is a tradition in Trenton, which cannot now be verified, that at this spot (the site on which he took position during the battle) a bullet struck the chestnut sorrel horse on which Washington rode that day, and so disabled the animal that another had to be procured for the general, the wounded horse being left in the village for treatment."

In Sully's painting the setting is a good representation of the Delaware River and the Pennsylvania and New Jersey shores in winter. The picture is more correct from the historian's viewpoint than Leutze's, and it was painted and engraved reproductions published years before the latter's work was thought of. It became a celebrated painting but never attained the popularity of Leutze's work. It might be supposed because it is more correct it would be used to a greater extent by publishers of historical works to illustrate the crossing. That this is not so is possibly due to the fact that it lacks the grandeur and animation which makes Leutze's picture so attractive.

Felix O. C. Darley's drawing is very similar in composition to Sully's painting and like the latter, shows Washington on a white horse, directing the embarking of his troops from the Pennsylvania shore. It is possibly the next best known picture of the event and has been extensively used by publishers of steel and wood engravings. The drawings of the figures and rendering of action, as well as the general treatment of the subject, is better than in Sully's picture. But in this one also, the river and opposite shore and even a dis-

tance beyond, can be seen as distinctly as on a bright, clear day.

Like Sully, Darley was a Philadelphian; he was born in 1822 and became one of the most prolific of illustrators. More of his work has been engraved than that of any other American artist. For the works of Fennimore Cooper alone he made more than five hundred drawings, and his illustrations altogether were almost numberless.

Although drawings executed by later artists to illustrate books, magazine articles and other works relating to the crossing of the Delaware are so numerous that any attempt to mention them in this paper is impracticable, I am not aware that any other original paintings than those I have named are in existence, unless I include my own treatment of the subject a few years ago. If the result of my effort is not a notable work from the painters' standard I have the satisfaction of knowing it is as true a historical record as a picture can be made without actually seeing the incident at the time it occurred. In preparing the work I obtained all available data, bearing upon the crossing of the Delaware, handed down to our time in written descriptions by soldiers who participated in the event. General William S. Stryker and Francis B. Lee, who furnished the material, were probably the best informed of any who have made a study of revolutionary events in and about Trenton, and despite the fact that my showing Washington standing rather than sitting in the boat has been criticized, I feel sure no one will ever paint the subject more true to historical facts, even though he may produce a greater work of art. Regarding the standing posture of Washington in my picture, it may readily be imagined that in his concern for the successful landing of the troops Washington would assume a standing position as his boat neared the Jersey shore, the better to see at the earliest moment what was transpiring there.

The Battle of Trenton, like the crossing of the Delaware, has served as a subject for reputable artists. And here again the older painters who might have made sketches of the battle ground as it appeared at the time, and obtained descriptions of the conflict at first hand from those who participated,

failed to appreciate, evidently, the need of rendering such important details. Even John Trumbull, an officer on Washington's staff and a painter of distinction in his day, seems to have thought the historical setting of the event was not essential to the picture.

In Trumbull's painting the opposing forces are lined up on either side, while Washington is receiving the surrender of the Hessian Colonel Rall in the centre between the two lines. The village is not shown or indicated in any way, and the surrender appears in this picture to have occurred on an open plain. Some light clouds are shown in the sky, but no evidence of storm, not even snow on the ground. Indeed, in this respect there is nothing to indicate that the surrender did not take place on a summer day. The picture is so at variance with the facts as we know them that I am convinced Trumbull was not present at the battle, as some writers have claimed. General Stryker, in his history, mentions Joseph Trumbull, colonel and commissary-general, as being on Washington's staff at the time of the battle of Trenton, but does not name John Trumbull, who was for a time, aide-de-camp to the commander in chief. If he had witnessed the scene I am sure Trumbull would have painted the weather conditions more correctly, he would not have rendered so formal a surrender with all the military pomp displayed in the picture, and would certainly have introduced a few houses to at least represent the village.

He would have known that Rall, fatally wounded, was being carried to his quarters in the Stacy Potts house, on King Street, at about the same time the two Hessian regiments, first to surrender, threw down their arms in another part of the village. He would have known that Rall did not personally hand his sword to General Washington, but that General Lord Stirling, as senior officer in the advance, received the arms of the officers commanding the defeated Hessian regiments. But, even though the artist was not present to witness the scene himself, we naturally wonder why he did not obtain descriptions from those who did take part, when it was so easy at the time he painted the picture to procure

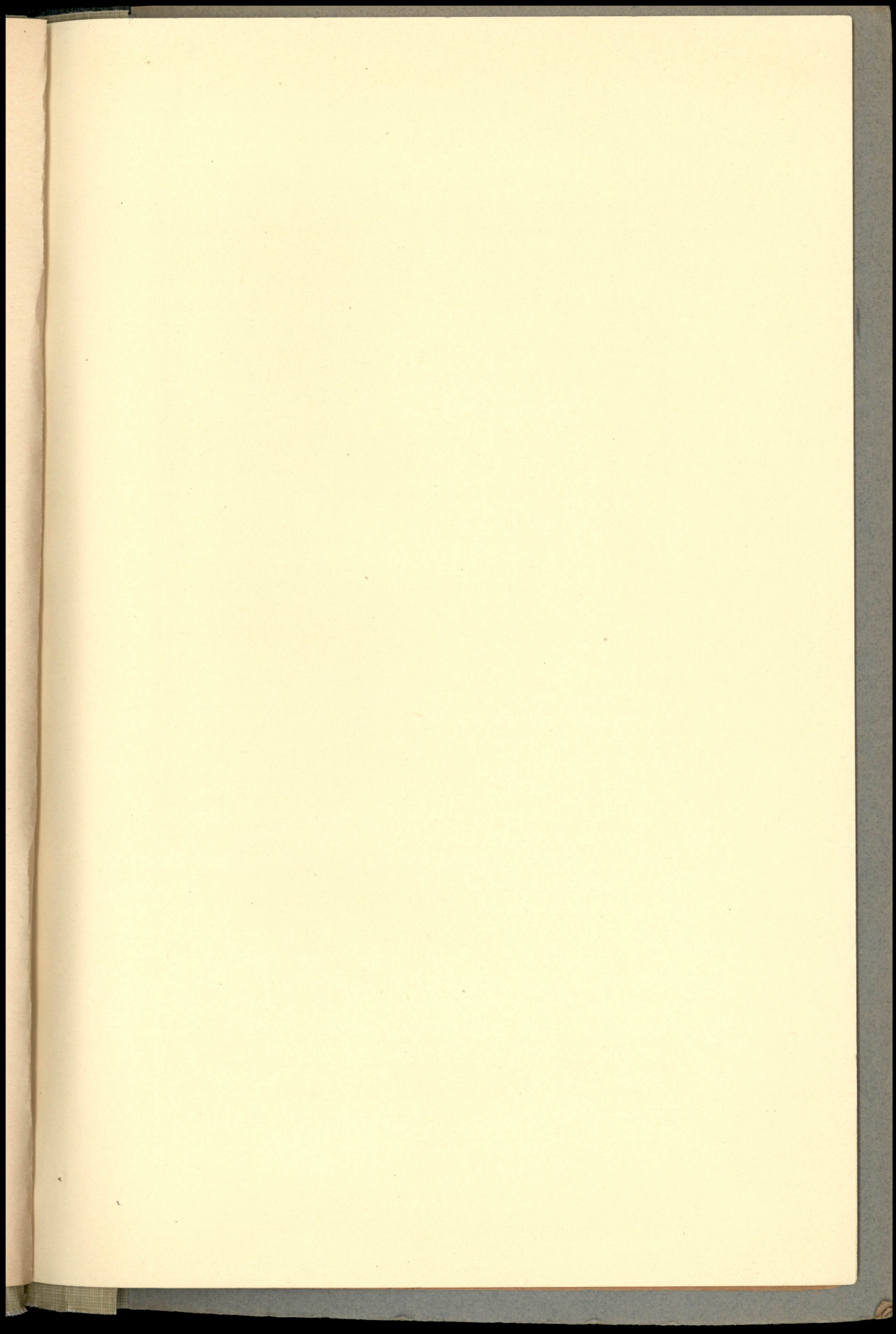
the information from those eyewitnesses, of whom a great number were still living.

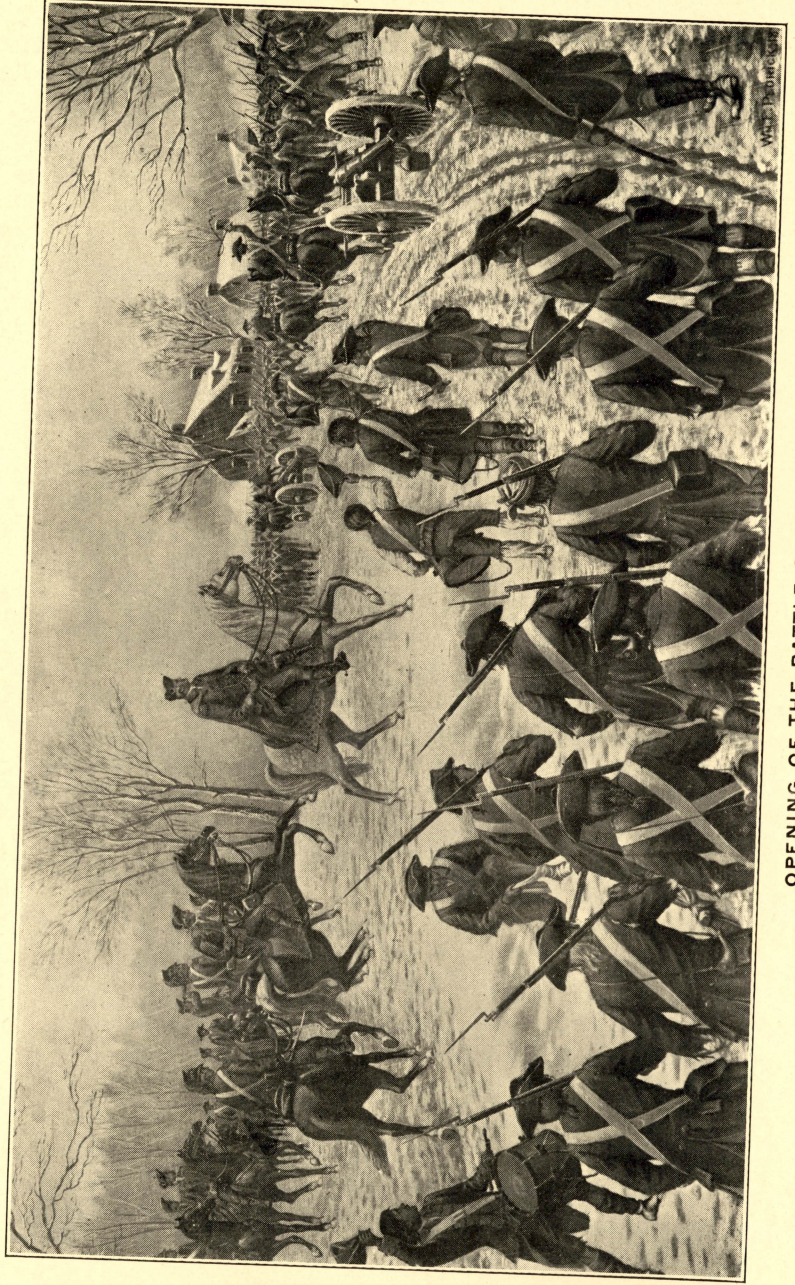
Some of you who visited the recent exhibition of historical prints at the Art Alliance building on South Warren Street may remember having seen a brightly colored lithograph bearing the title: "Surrender of the Hessian Troops to General Washington after the Battle of Trenton." In this picture the artist has let his imagination run wild, without any historical restriction whatever. He has produced a very fanciful conception of the subject.

The American and Hessian troops are facing each other in opposite lines as in the Trumbull painting, and a central group, representing Washington receiving the surrender from Colonel Rall, completes the similarity. In this picture also no sign of a village appears, but in lieu of houses the artist shows high hills, resembling a range of mountains. On the right is a group of tents, giving the appearance of a military camp, and on the left a number of Indians add variety to the scene.

Another picture noted in the exhibition was a steel engraving, of about the same class as the picture just mentioned. This one, however, is somewhat more correct because it does represent the fight in a village street and in stormy weather. The American troops are charging the Hessians in perfect line formation, as though passing before a reviewing officer. Washington, mounted on a white horse, is in the lead, waving his sword and not condescending to notice the enemy. He is within a few feet of the Hessian cannon trained directly on him, with a gunner about to apply the fuse. If nothing else, this picture is a good illustration of the charmed life attributed to the Father of his Country by both friend and foe.

There are innumerable pictures of this class among the steel engravings, lithographs, wood cuts and drawings published in the early part of the nineteenth century which have absolutely no artistic or historical value. They are valued, however, by collectors of curios, to whom they appeal as specimens of rare prints. They are worse than deficient in an educational sense and abominable as pretentions to art.





OPENING OF THE BATTLE OF TRENTON  
A PAINTING BY LIEUT.-COLONEL WILLIAM E. PEDRICK

Alonzo Chappel, a skillful artist who executed a great number of paintings of historical events and personages for purposes of reproduction by steel engraving, during the pre-centennial period, is the painter of a well known picture showing the wounded Colonel Rall, supported by one of his officers, handing his sword to General Washington. This picture is open to the same criticism as the Trumbull painting regarding the surrender, but in Chappel's work the winter sky and snow covered ground are more truthful, as are other details of the composition.

But, for historical accuracy, one of the best paintings of incidents connected with the battle of Trenton is, perhaps, the one by George W. Flagg, depicting Generals Washington and Greene visiting the dying Hessian commander at the house of Stacy Potts.

Flagg, a painter of considerable prominence, born 1816, died 1897, is said to have made a careful study of the apartment in which Rall died. The figures in the picture are actual portraits of the personages represented; that of Colonel Rall being copied from a sketch made from life by John Trumbull. A half-tone reproduction of this picture is on page 191 of Stryker's history and a foot-note states that the original painting is in the possession of one of the descendants of Stacy Potts, Joseph P. Lloyd, of Orange, New Jersey.

Of the fight itself, the most correct of the older pictures of which I have any knowledge, is a drawing by C. Schuessele. In this picture is shown some of the houses which stood near the junction of King and Queen Streets as they actually appeared at the time of the battle. Hamilton's battery, in position at the head of King Street, has opened fire on the Hessian front and the American troops are rushing forward. The scene is spirited and full of action and the correct details of the setting show the artist has made a careful study of the ground and history of the battle. A small steel engraving of this picture is in possession of the Old Barracks Association, as is also a painting of my own, executed in 1893, showing practically the same scene, but from a position farther north, on the ground now known as the Chambers' estate, from which Washington directed operations during the battle.

There are, probably, other pictures in existence, of this first important victory in the struggle for American independence, but those I have mentioned are the only ones of any consequence with which I am familiar.

A large painting of the surrender of the Von Knyphausen Regiment, in the apple orchard east of Queen Street and north of the Assunpink creek, which hung for several years in the Broad Street Bank, in this city, prior to 1916, was a representation of the scene closely conforming to historical data, and the bronze tablets on the Battle Monument are also made to adhere closely to known facts of the battle.

Of the second battle of Trenton, or the Battle of the Assunpink, as it is more often named, I know of no picture worthy of comment, excepting, of course, Trumbull's portrait of "Washington at the Assunpink Bridge," which cannot properly be classed as a painting of the battle.

I have seen an old print, possibly engraved from a painting, which purports to be a representation of the battle of the Assunpink, but the bridge which is conspicuously shown in the picture and on which the principal struggle is taking place, is in no way like the one which spanned the creek at that time, while a five story building, prominently placed and presumably intended to represent the old Stacy mill, is an absurdity.

The Trumbull portrait of Washington, showing a bit of the Assunpink battle as a background, was painted in Philadelphia in 1792. Two years previously, in 1790, the same artist had painted another, and very similar portrait of Washington, for the city of New York, also a whole length figure in full uniform, standing by a white horse. This picture is so like the former that the same title might be consistently applied to it. To Trumbull, Washington gave more sittings than he accorded any other painter, except Charles Wilson Peale.

Of the Assunpink portrait the painter himself says: "I undertook it \* \* \* meaning to give his military character in the most sublime moment of its exertion, the evening previous to the battle of Princeton, when viewing the vast superiority of his approaching enemy and the impossibility

of again crossing the Delaware or retreating down the river, he conceives the plan of returning by a night march into the country from which he had just been driven, thus cutting off the enemy's communication and destroying his depot of stores and provisions at Brunswick. I told the president my object; he entered into it warmly and as the work advanced we talked of the scene, its dangers, its almost desperation. He looked the scene again and I happily transferred to the canvas the lofty expression of his animated countenance, the high resolve to conquer or perish. The result was, in my own opinion, eminently successful, and the General was satisfied."

To Charles Wilson Peale belongs the distinction of painting more original portraits of Washington than any other artist. Peale also served in the American army during the revolution and it was due to this fact, perhaps, that he was enabled to induce Washington to sit to him so often. It is said he made fourteen different pictures from life and executed many replicas of these. One painting, a full length, was commenced at Valley Forge in the spring of 1778, continued at New Brunswick after the battle of Monmouth and finally finished at Philadelphia.

Peale painted the full length portrait of Washington which represents him standing on the battle field of Princeton, with General Mercer lying on the ground wounded and supported by his aide, Major John Armstrong, and in the distance the troops engaged in battle. This picture was painted for the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University, and occupies a frame in the university museum in which was formerly displayed a portrait of King George the Second. The latter is said to have been destroyed by a cannon ball from Hamilton's battery, which pierced the wall of Nassau Hall during the battle and went through the canvas, cutting off the head of his Brittanic majesty.

Of the battle of Princeton there are several pictured versions, most of which might be labeled as any other battle of the revolution and be just as true to the scene. A lithograph among the prints at the recent Art Alliance exhibition, alleged to be a representation of the battle of Princeton, was fearfully and wonderfully conceived. The publisher, N. Cur-

rier, New York, 1846, disavowed any claim to originating the picture in a line on the print, which states it was copied from Graham's Magazine.

There may be a few good pictures of the battle of Princeton, or incidents connected therewith, but the only one I can recall, deserving of any special notice, is a scene depicting the wounding of General Mercer. I have not seen the original painting but have seen an engraving of it, which gave a good idea of the original. The picture presents a fairly good impression of the Princeton battle ground; probably because the Thomas Clark house is shown in the distance and what can be seen of the terrene is not inconsistent with the ground as it appears today. The figures of General Mercer and the two British soldiers who are bayoneting him, and those seen in the background are stiff and unnatural, but the conception and treatment of the subject is better than in many of the old pictures. I cannot name the artist because the engraving I saw did not give credit to the painter.

As an impressive work showing ideality and grandeur in a picture, a conspicuous example is the painting of "Washington Receiving a Salute on the Battle Field of Trenton," by John Faed, a Scotch artist and member of the Royal Scottish Academy. The picture shows Washington mounted on a beautiful white steed, his arm extended in the attitude of pointing with his sword, presumably to some position on the battle ground to which he is directing troops. There is no perceptible reason in the picture for connecting it with the battle of Trenton, except the title given it by the artist. It is, however, handsome enough to do credit to the title. The portrait is an ideal conception and not painted from life as were those of Trumbull and Peale. The head of Washington in Faed's painting was evidently copied from Stuart's well known and popular Athenaeum portrait, and the work shows the skill of a clever hand.

I will mention one other picture and close this rambling discourse which I am aware does not do justice to its subject.

Several years ago I saw a large painting exhibited in the window of a New York art dealer. I have forgotten who the

artist was but the picture made such an impression on my mind that it is vividly before me whenever I have occasion to recall it, and as it represented the ragged continentals, after the battle of Trenton, marching through the village on their way to recross the Delaware, it may be appropriately recalled here.

The striking thing about the picture was the way it impressed the spectator with the realism of the scene and made him feel that he was one of that motley body of men marching toward him with excitement and joy beaming in their faces, their bodies exhilarated with the pleasure of victory, all thought of weariness and discomfort gone as they stride through the sleet and snow of the cold winter day. There may have been errors in the picture that an historian, familiar with Trenton battle history, could criticize; I was myself too young and unacquainted with such history at the time to know, but the picture was a real work of art by a master painter. As you gazed at it you felt the blood warm in your veins, your feet move with an impulse to keep step with the shrill music of fifes and marshal beat of drums by musicians at the head of the column.

In imagination you marched with those men who had just broken another link in the chain which bound them to a tyrannical monarch and commenced, with this first victory, that series of brilliant military movements which was to free the American colonies from an abhorrent rule, and make possible the founding of the greatest government, and the best, in the history of the world.

I believe a painter cannot be too careful when preparing to paint a picture dealing with an historical subject, to inform himself thoroughly concerning every item of historical detail which is to enter into his composition and become a part of the scene he is about to produce, for his work, besides an appeal to the senses, should be a medium of education, and as such must record events of historical import as truthfully as the writer of history is expected to do—but when a painter can, with the product of his brush, stir our latent emotions, swell our pride of country and inspire renewed patriotism, as

could the painter through the picture just noted, he accomplishes the purpose for which the Great Master of the Universe endowed him with skill, and if in such a picture is found a trivial detail historically inaccurate the error may be excused, because the artist has atoned for it by his wonderfully rare achievement.