

The Bridge



"The Bridge," by John Falter (1974)

By the mid-twentieth century, Nebraska native John Falter had become one of the nation's most celebrated illustrators. In the years leading up to the U.S. Bicentennial, he was commissioned to create a series of historical paintings that reexamined pivotal moments in America's past. Among them was *The Bridge*, his dramatic portrayal of the clash at the North Bridge during the Battle of Concord.

In April 1775, British regulars marched out of Boston to seize weapons and supplies stockpiled by the Massachusetts militia. Their confrontation with local farmers and minutemen at the North Bridge would ignite the American Revolution—an event immortalized by Ralph Waldo Emerson as the "shot heard round the world."

After Falter's death, his widow donated the contents of his studio to the Nebraska State Historical Society. The collection preserves not only his artwork, but also his written reflections on the care and scholarship behind it. Falter believed that fresh insight could be found even in the most familiar stories.

"The confrontation at the bridge suggests a symbolic 'crossing' that the Americans elected to make for their own self-rule," he wrote. "If they lost their bid for freedom, they would be dealt with quite harshly by the British. In other words, they were really 'putting it all on the line' at Lexington and Concord."

Choosing such a well-known subject was no small task. Generations of Americans felt they already knew the story, thanks in part to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and his 1860 poem, *Paul Revere's Ride*, which famously concludes the battle scene with: "You know the rest."

Falter set out to show something viewers might not expect: "a tranquil country background that has suddenly been shook asunder by the first cracks of militarily-synchronized musket fire." To create this mood, he added telling details—a flurry of blackbirds taking flight, a startled brown Swiss cow—small touches that convey the shock of violence intruding on everyday rural life.

"Including these background elements in the painting is part of what I mean by 'looking at history out of the corner of your eye,'" he explained.

Authenticity mattered deeply to Falter. With the help of a professional historian, he incorporated period-accurate details: shoes were not yet made for right and left feet; cattle were smaller; the wildlife includes the now-extinct passenger pigeon; and the captured British flag reflects an earlier version of the Union Jack. For his figures, Falter turned to contemporary local militia reenactors, grounding his iconic scene in both careful research and living history.

Through meticulous scholarship and a keen artistic eye, Falter invited viewers to see a familiar American story anew.