*From the listless repose of the place, and the peculiar character of its inhabitants, who are descendants from the original Dutch settlers, this sequestered glen has long been known by the name of Sleepy Hollow... A drowsy, dreamy influence seems to hang over the land, and to pervade the very atmosphere.*

The story is set in 1790 in the countryside around the Dutch settlement of Tarry Town (historical Tarrytown, New York), in a secluded glen called Sleepy Hollow. Sleepy Hollow is renowned for its ghosts and the haunting atmosphere that pervades the imaginations of its inhabitants and visitors. The most infamous spectre in the Hollow is the Headless Horseman, said to be the ghost of a Hessian trooper who had his head shot off by a stray cannonball during “some nameless battle” of the American Revolutionary War, and who “rides forth to the scene of battle in nightly quest of his head”.

The “Legend” relates the tale of Ichabod Crane, a lean, lanky and extremely superstitious schoolmaster from Connecticut, who competes with Abraham “Brom Bones” Van Brunt, the town rowdy, for the hand of 18-year-old Katrina Van Tassel, the daughter and sole child of a wealthy farmer, Baltus Van Tassel. Crane, a Yankee and an outsider, sees marriage to Katrina as a means of procuring Van Tassel's extravagant wealth. Bones, the local hero, vies with Ichabod for Katrina’s hand, exacting a series of pranks on the jittery schoolmaster, and the fate of Sleepy Hollow’s fortune weighs in the balance for some time. The tension between the three is soon brought to a head. On a placid autumn night, the ambitious Crane attends a harvest party at the Van Tassels’ homestead. He dances, partakes in the feast, and listens to ghostly legends told by Brom and the locals, but his true aim is to propose to Katrina after the guests leave. His intentions, however, are ill-fated.

After having failed to secure Katrina’s hand, Ichabod rides home “heavy-hearted and crestfallen” through the woods between Van Tassel’s farmstead and the Sleepy Hollow settlement. As he passes several purportedly haunted spots, his active imagination is engorged by the ghost stories told at Baltus’ harvest party. After nervously passing under a lightning-stricken tulip tree purportedly haunted by the ghost of British spy Major André, Ichabod encounters a cloaked rider at an intersection in a menacing swamp. Unsettled by his fellow traveler’s eerie size and silence, the teacher is horrified to discover that his companion’s head is not on his shoulders, but on his saddle. In a frenzied race to the bridge adjacent to the Old Dutch Burying Ground, where the Hessian is said to “vanish, according to rule, in a flash of fire and brimstone” upon crossing it, Ichabod rides for his life, desperately goading his temperamental plow horse down the Hollow. However, to the pedagogue’s horror, the ghoul clambers over the bridge, rears his horse, and hurls his decapitated head into Ichabod’s terrified face.

The next morning, Ichabod has mysteriously disappeared from town, leaving Katrina to marry Brom Bones, who was said “to look exceedingly knowing whenever the story of Ichabod was related.” Indeed, the only relics of the schoolmaster’s flight are his wandering horse, trampled saddle, discarded hat, and a mysterious shattered pumpkin. Although the nature of the Headless Horseman is left open to interpretation, the story implies that the ghost was really Brom (an agile stunt rider) in disguise. Irving’s narrator concludes, however, by stating that the old Dutch wives continue to promote the belief that Ichabod was “spirited away by supernatural means”, and a legend develops around his disappearance and sightings of his melancholy spirit.

The more spectral elements of “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” were likely based on German folktales concerning “The Wild Huntsman”, a ghoulish phantom that would chase interlopers through the woods at maddening speeds. Often this apparition was headless and its victims lacking in virtue or morality. Irving wrote *The Sketch Book* during a tour of Europe, and German ghost stories proved especially inspiring to his imagination. One particularly influential rendition of this folktale was recorded by the German folklorist Karl Musäus. Headless horsemen were staples of Northern European storytelling, featuring in German, Irish (e.g., Dullahan), Scandinavian (e.g., the Wild Hunt), and English legends. Decapitated riders were known to race through the countryside, heads tucked under their arms, followed by hordes of coal-black hounds with fiery tongues. Usually viewed as omens of ill-fortune for those who chose to disregard their apparitions, these specters found their victims in proud, scheming persons and characters with hubris and arrogance.

During the height of the American Revolutionary War, Irving writes that the country surrounding Tarry Town “was one of those highly-favored places which abound with chronicle and great men. The British and American line had run near it during the war; it had, therefore, been the scene of marauding, and infested with refugees, cow-boys, and all kinds of border chivalry.” Westchester County was the site of many raids, skirmishes, war crimes, marauding, and ravishing after the Continental Army abandoned it in October 1776. The British occupied the country south of the Bronx River, and the American were fortified north of Peekskill, leaving Westchester County a thirty-mile stretch of scorched and desolated no-man's land, vulnerable to outlaws, raiders, and vigilantes. Besides droves of Loyalist rangers and British light infantry, Hessian Jägers —renowned sharpshooters and horsemen—were among the raiders that often skirmished with Patriot militias. The Headless Horseman, said to be a decapitated Hessian soldier, may have indeed been based loosely on the discovery of just such a Jäger’s headless corpse found in Sleepy Hollow after a violent skirmish, and later buried by the Van Tassel family in an unmarked grave in the Old Dutch Burying Ground. The dénouement of the fictional tale is set at the bridge over the Pocantico River in the area of the Old Dutch Church and Burying Ground in Sleepy Hollow.

Irving, while he was an aide-de-camp to New York Gov. Daniel D. Tompkins, met an army captain named Ichabod Crane in Sackets Harbor, New York during an inspection tour of fortifications in 1814. He may have patterned the character in “The Legend” after Jesse Merwin, who taught at the local schoolhouse in Kinderhook, further north along the Hudson River, where Irving spent several months in 1809. The inspiration for the character of Katrina Van Tassel is uncertain, although both Catriena Ecker Van Tessel and her niece Eleanor Van Tassel Brush are buried in the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery and have been proposed as models.

The story was the longest one published as part of The Sketch Book, which Irving issued using the pseudonym “Geoffrey Crayon” in 1820. Alongside “Rip Van Winkle”, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” is one of Irving's most anthologized, studied, and adapted sketches. Both stories are often paired together in books and other representations, and both are included in surveys of early American literature and Romanticism. Irving’s depictions of regional culture and his themes of progress versus tradition, supernatural intervention in the commonplace, and the plight of the individual outsider in a homogeneous community permeate both stories and helped to develop a unique sense of American cultural and existential selfhood during the early nineteenth century.

“The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” follows a tradition of folk tales and poems involving a supernatural wild chase, including Robert Burns's “Tam o’ Shanter” (1790), and Bürger’s *Der wilde Jäger*, translated as *The Wild Huntsman* (1796).