

CAUSES OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: FOCUS ON BOSTON

A UNIT OF STUDY FOR GRADES 7-12

DAVID L. GHERE, *University of Minnesota*
JAN F. SPREEMAN, *Stillwater Jr. High School*



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ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN HISTORIANS
AND THE
NATIONAL CENTER FOR HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS

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APPROACH AND RATIONALE

The National Center for History in the Schools and the Organization of American Historians have developed the following collection of lessons for teaching with primary sources. Our units are the fruit of a collaboration between history professors and experienced teachers of United States History. They represent specific “dramatic episodes” in history from which you and your students can pause to delve into the deeper meanings of these selected landmark events and explore their wider context in the great historical narrative. By studying a crucial turning-point in history the student becomes aware that choices had to be made by real human beings, that those decisions were the result of specific factors, and that they set in motion a series of historical consequences. We have selected dramatic episodes that bring alive that decision-making process. We hope that through this approach, your students will realize that history is an ongoing, open-ended process, and that the decisions they make today create the conditions of tomorrow’s history.

Our teaching units are based on primary sources, taken from documents, artifacts, journals, diaries, newspapers and literature from the period under study. What we hope to achieve using primary source documents in these lessons is to remove the distance that students feel from historical events and to connect them more intimately with the past. In this way we hope to recreate for your students a sense of “being there,” a sense of seeing history through the eyes of the very people who were making decisions. This will help your students develop historical empathy, to realize that history is not an impersonal process divorced from real people like themselves. At the same time, by analyzing primary sources, students will actually practice the historian’s craft, discovering for themselves how to analyze evidence, establish a valid interpretation and construct a coherent narrative in which all the relevant factors play a part.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Within this unit, you will find: 1) Unit Objectives, 2) Correlation to the National History Standards, 3) Teacher Background Materials, 4) Lesson Plans, and 5) Student Resources. This unit, as we have said above, focuses on certain key moments in time and should be used as a supplement to your customary course materials. Although these lessons are recommended for grades 10-12, they can be adapted for other grade levels.

The teacher background section should provide you with a good overview of the entire unit and with the historical information and context necessary to link the specific dramatic episode to the larger historical narrative. You may consult

it for your own use, and you may choose to share it with students if they are of a sufficient grade level to understand the materials.

The lesson plans include a variety of ideas and approaches for the teacher which can be elaborated upon or cut as you see the need. These lesson plans contain student resources which accompany each lesson. The resources consist of primary source documents, any hand-outs or student background materials, and a bibliography.

In our series of teaching units, each collection can be taught in several ways. You can teach all of the lessons offered on any given topic, or you can select and adapt the ones that best support your particular course needs. We have not attempted to be comprehensive or prescriptive in our offerings, but rather to give you an array of enticing possibilities for in-depth study, at varying grade levels. We hope that you will find the lesson plans exciting and stimulating for your classes. We also hope that your students will never again see history as a boring sweep of inevitable facts and meaningless dates but rather as an endless treasure of real life stories, and an exercise in analysis and reconstruction.

DRAMATIC MOMENT

The Boston Massacre



Engraved by Paul Revere
(Library of Congress)

Examine the engraving as colonial propaganda. How does Revere depict the British troops? their commander? Are the Bostonians portrayed as a mob antagonizing the British soldiers? Notice that a rifle, barely seen from a window in Butcher's Hall, is being discharged at the people gathering in the square. What is the artist's message in this engraving?

TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit addresses the intellectual foundations, the emotional attitudes and the specific political events that combined to create an imperial crisis between Great Britain and her North American colonies in the early 1760s and 1770s. It also provides material that can be used to promote a better understanding of economic and social relations during the same period.

During the Revolutionary era the role of women, African Americans and Native Americans was significant. From formal organizations such as the Daughters of Liberty to boycott meetings to informal social gatherings to private letters, colonial women displayed a keen interest in the events of the time. Yet the documentary evidence is scattered and conspicuous by its absence. Native American and African American sources are almost nonexistent and written or visual references to them by others are almost always symbolic and demeaning. It is important for students to be aware that the story of the American Revolution is based on a documentary record that reflected the political establishment. Women, urban poor, small freeholders, and people of color are all too often excluded from eighteenth-century documents on which historians base their study of the American Revolution. Students should not **only be aware of who** and what was recorded, but what was excluded and why.

The selections in this teaching unit address these issues but larger questions are raised. Why are the views of women almost totally absent from the political/legal discussion of rights and loyalty? Why are written accounts of events or testimony in trials almost exclusively given by white males? What does this suggest about the prevailing societal beliefs and attitudes concerning who should be included or excluded from the events of that period? What positions did women and minorities occupy in pre-Revolutionary America and did the unfolding events have an effect on their role in society?

The primary goal for this history unit is to provide teaching materials for easy use in the secondary classroom while retaining the logical argumentation, the rich flowery language and the burning emotion that is contained in the original documents. Therefore, the documents contained in this teaching unit have been edited to eliminate most words or phrases that would be confusing or meaningless to modern secondary level students and spelling, capitalization and punctuation have been adjusted to modern American usage (for example, labor instead of *labour*, mixed instead of *mixt*, or has instead of *hath*). Some extremely long complex sentences have been broken up into smaller sentences with the appropriate changes in punctuation and capitalization, and in two instances, phrases that were grammatically incorrect have been reworded for clarity. The editing was always done with a concern both for accurately conveying the thoughts and intent of the author of the document and for preserving the original flavor and context of each document.

Lesson 1 provides seven documents that enable students to examine the issues of taxation and representation, particularly those associated with the Stamp Act Crisis (1765-66), from a variety of perspectives and to appreciate the diversity of opinion on both sides of the Atlantic. **Lesson 2** utilizes political cartoons to illustrate the contending views throughout the colonial struggle with a primary focus on the Townshend Acts in 1768. In these first two sections (3-5 class periods), students will examine the political and philosophical arguments concerning taxation and imperial control that defined British-Colonial relations between 1763 and 1770 as well as the various methods of colonial resistance. These primary sources provide multiple perspectives on the issues and events that lead from one colonial crisis to another, ultimately resulting in violence in the streets of Boston in 1770.

Lesson 3 consists of a detailed role-playing simulation of the Boston Incident (Boston Massacre) Trial which is designed to run for one week, from the selection of witnesses to the closing statements. Students acting as prosecutors and defense attorneys must possess a clear knowledge of the long, intermediate and short term causes of the Boston Incident and interpret them from the perspective of those who they represent. Students who portray witnesses and defendants must be aware of the circumstances that shaped their attitudes and biased their testimony. The testimony provided in this section is based on eyewitness accounts compiled by the authors from several sources. In order to prepare their cases, student-lawyers will review relevant primary documents and the statements of witnesses. As attorneys and witnesses interact, the students gain unique perspectives on the historical process and its impact on the administration of justice.

Lesson 4 provides six documents that focus on the Boston Tea Party and the events that precipitate the outbreak of hostilities. The diversity of colonial opinion is highlighted as well as the emotional range of American reaction to British policies from formal petitions and vitriolic rhetoric to physical violence. The entire teaching unit consisting of primary documents, discussion questions, learning activities and the role-playing simulation promotes the student's understanding of the principles ultimately articulated in the Declaration of Independence.

II. UNIT CONTEXT

In the typical United States History survey course, this unit should follow class topics on the social, political and economic maturation of the American colonies in the early 1700s. Also, a discussion of Anglo-American frustrations and/or antagonisms during the colonial wars coupled with an examination of the cost to the British treasury of the removal of the French threat to the colonies would lead easily into this unit. Completion of this unit should prepare the students for a detailed consideration of the Declaration of Independence and a discussion of the early formation of state and national governments. The unit's focus on Massachusetts and particularly the simulation on the Boston Massacre could also tie in nicely with a detailed treatment of the events involved at Lexington, Concord and Bunker Hill.

This unit is designed for a two to three week time period but is structured to be easily modified for use in a variety of secondary and post-secondary classroom situations and to provide great flexibility in the use of class time. The unit can be used as a whole, independently as separate sections, or by extracting selected documents to enhance other classroom strategies. Student activities could include engaging in debates, writing mock newspaper articles about specific events, producing posters, staging demonstrations and role playing as they define their positions on the unfolding events. After having examined the cause and effect relationships of these events, students will be challenged to engage those events from a variety of British and Colonial perspectives.

III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS

Causes of the American Revolution: Focus on Boston provides an excellent opportunity for students to demonstrate their knowledge of cause and effect relationships in history and their ability to engage those events from numerous perspectives. This unit provides documentary materials and teaching options relating to the *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), Era 3, Standards 1A and 1B, *Demonstrate understanding of the causes of the American Revolution* and *Understand the principles articulated in the Declaration of Independence*. This unit also addresses the five Historical Thinking Standards outlined in Part 2, Chapter 2 of the *National Standards for History*. Lessons provide primary source materials which challenge students to explain historical change and continuity; consider multiple perspectives; compare and contrast differing sets of ideas and values; draw evidence from visual sources; reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage; and identify the purpose, perspective, and point of view of a document. The simulation of the Boston Incident Trial, in particular, challenges arguments of historical inevitability and requires students to identify problems and solutions; analyze the interests of people involved; formulate a position or course of action on an issue; and marshal the necessary knowledge and logic to reach an acceptable conclusion.

IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

1. Students will identify the major elements of the Anglo-American disputes over taxation and imperial restrictions from 1763 to 1775 as well as the various methods of resistance used by the colonists.
2. Students will understand the cause and effect relationship of historical events, particularly the contribution of earlier disputes over taxation to the political atmosphere that fostered the Boston Incident and the impact of those historical events on the administration of justice in this case.
3. Students will recognize the historical implications of the trial both as a culminating episode and a precipitating event in pre-Revolutionary America.
4. Students will interpret primary documents and examine how that interpretation alters historical perspective and how inquiry methods can be applied to the historical process.