

The Siege of Boston

A Document-Based Lesson



A Plan of Boston, and its Environs shewing the true Situation of His Majesty's Army.
London: Andrew Dury, 1776. [Map depicts Boston in October 1775.]

<http://www.masshist.org/database/2053>

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Preface:

The creation of this lesson was made possible by the generous support of the staff of the Massachusetts Historical Society. I am truly grateful for their warm welcome and for all of the encouragement and assistance they offered during my time in residence.

Introduction:

Incensed by the colonists' [dumping of British tea into Boston Harbor](#), King George III and Parliament, in an attempt to once and for all curb the growing insubordination of the American colonists, passed a series of laws in the spring of 1774 (known to the colonists as the [Intolerable Acts](#)), closing the Harbor to colonial trade and placing the town of Boston under martial law. After the battles of [Lexington and Concord](#), the Continental army under the direction of the [newly commissioned General George Washington](#) (camped at Longfellow House in Cambridge), now clearly in open rebellion against the Crown, responded to the unwanted presence of the mighty British army by laying siege to the town, cutting off passage at Boston Neck and trapping the enemy and residents on the peninsula ([see map](#)) until Washington and his fledgling army forced them to finally evacuate the Harbor and the town on March 17, 1776. The British Army would never again return to New England. How the critical players on both sides reacted during the siege of Boston is the subject of this primary-source- based curriculum unit.

Learning Objectives:

During this unit students will

- examine in depth a number of primary sources relating to the siege of Boston
- answer questions and participate in discussion concerning the documents

By the end of this unit students will have

- critically analyzed the importance of referencing primary documents
- worked towards developing historical habits of mind
- shown that they can apply their knowledge of the period and documents

Alignment with Mass. State Frameworks:

Concepts and Skills: (1) Distinguish between long-term and short-term cause and effect relationships. (2) Show connections, causal and otherwise, between particular historical events and ideas and larger social, economic, and political trends and developments.

(3) Interpret the past within its own historical context rather than in terms of present-day norms and values. (4) Distinguish historical fact from opinion.

U.S. History I Learning Standards: (1) USI.4 Analyze how Americans resisted British policies before 1775 and analyze the reasons for the American victory and the British defeat during the Revolutionary war.

(2) USI.5 Explain the role of Massachusetts in the revolution, including important events that took place in Massachusetts and important leaders from Massachusetts.

Rationale:

This lesson is document centered and organized as such:

1) Doing History

- a) Using primary sources
- b) The limits of the historical record
- c) Developing historical habits of mind

Note: The National Council for History Education Inc. developed a list of habits of mind that will encourage and enable students to think critically about history and its importance. Form more information consult [Illinois State University's National History Project](#).

2) Analyzing the documents:

- a) Civilians in Boston
- b) Soldiers in Boston
- c) Washington in Boston

This unit is roughly 8-10 days long but could be adapted to fit a smaller time constraint. An effort was made to organize the lessons in such a way that they would be easily adaptable to accommodate the needs of a variety of teachers and to allow teachers to manipulate them to fit their own individual teaching styles as well as the needs of their students. The goal was to provide documentary resources organized around a central theme, as working closely with primary sources not only helps to bring history alive for students, but also allows them to develop critical thinking skills that they can apply across the curriculum. All documents necessary to teach this lesson can be found in the attached document packet.

Assessment:

For the daily readings and discussions, assessment can be conducted by the teacher anecdotally. The following rubrics may be helpful:

For class discussion

<http://www.edci.purdue.edu/vanfossen/604/604partrubric.html>

<http://teachers.teach-nology.com/cgi-bin/classpar.cgi>

For written homework

<http://www.teach-nology.com/cgi-bin/homework.cgi>

The final cumulative assessment is twofold:

- (1) Students will write a 3-4 page play for performance dramatizing an event from the time period studied. In addition to writing a play that is historically accurate, they must draw from their exposure to the documents to mimic the vocabulary, speech patterns and style of the period.
- (2) Students will complete the historical habits of mind chart (see page 10), filling in the third columns with examples from their examination of the documents. They will then write a 3-4 page free response paper reflecting on the following questions:
 - ❖ How does the practice of studying historical documents provide insights into the time period?
 - ❖ How does it help you to develop historical habits of mind?

In both assignments students must show (a) that they have carefully examined the documents and (b) that they can think independently about them.

Background Information for the Teacher:

The Revolutionary War's opening clashes took place at Lexington Green and Concord's North Bridge on April 19, 1775, when British regulars in Boston were dispatched to Concord to capture rebel munitions stored there. The American militia, having been forewarned of the British approach, drove the British back to Boston, trapping them on the peninsula and beginning the eleven-month siege of Boston by the American forces. Shortly after the April conflict, in June of the same year, the Second Continental Congress commissioned George Washington as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, who accepted his position and set up camp at what is now the Longfellow House in Cambridge. Congress had at the same time called 30,000 men to arms from across New England. Local officers were also commissioned: Gen. Artemas Ward as Commander-in-chief of the Massachusetts troops, Gen. Nathaniel Greene from Rhode Island, Gen. Nathaniel Folsom from New Hampshire, and Gen. Israel Putnam from Connecticut.

Meanwhile the British in Boston, under the command of Gen. Thomas Gage, whose forces had been recently re-enforced in May of 1775 with fresh troops and the aid of Generals Burgoyne, Clinton and Howe, began to make plans to take Dorchester Heights and thus end the siege. Their efforts were thwarted however, when five days before the operation was to take place, the Americans learned of it and initiated a countermove, a move that would become the Battle of Bunker Hill, June 17, 1775.

Bunker Hill was somewhat of a watershed in terms of the siege as well as the war at large. The British were ultimately victorious and took the hill, but only after a sustained and well organized effort by the Americans to defend it. Casualty numbers for the British were exceedingly high, upwards of 40%, and officers in particular were hit hard (about 100, which comprised one-eighth of the casualties for all of the major battles of the war). The relative success of the Americans' attempt shook the confidence of the British commanders, who hadn't expected their enemy to pose a serious threat. As a result, they never again reacted with the speed and aggression they showed in Boston on June 17, ever fearful of "another Bunker Hill".

With the British spinning their wheels entrenched in Boston, Gen. Washington and his command had the luxury of carefully planning their next move. Woefully short on powder and artillery, Washington sent General Henry Knox, a former Boston bookseller (and later Washington's secretary of war) north to the recently acquired Fort Ticonderoga to carry the stores of gunpowder, cannon, guns and pounders down to Boston. Knox and a small contingent set out to make the 300 mile (each way) journey on November 16, 1775. They reached the fort on December 5, and began the work of transporting 50-60 cannon and mortars, a cargo weighing almost 200,000 pounds. Knox and his men procured 42 sleds and 80 yoke of oxen to carry their load, and immediately set out for Boston. The journey across rocky terrain covered with ice and heavy snows was completed with such speed that it even surprised Knox, and by January 24, 1776, Knox's "noble train of artillery" had reached Cambridge.

Still pondering his best course of action, Washington held a war council with his high command on February 16, during which time he proposed that the American forces mount an offensive, taking advantage of the passage provided by the frozen ice across the Back Bay. Washington's officers, not confident that their forces were strong enough for such a mission, disagreed, and offered a less ambitious plan: fortify Dorchester Heights and engage the enemy from a place that they had had sufficient opportunity to reinforce. Washington in his wisdom took the council of his officers and in early March ordered that the Heights be fortified with the artillery

recently obtained by Knox. By March 4, General Howe and his men noticed the fortifications, and planned a countermove on March 5–6. However, a nor'easter having struck the town as the least (or *most* from the Americans' perspective) advantageous moment, Howe decided to call off the attack on March 7, at which time he made plans to evacuate the city. Finally on March 17, 1776, about 11,000 army and navy personnel, along with 1,000 Loyalists boarded ships and left the town of Boston, never to return to the town or the province of Massachusetts again.

Additional Background and Sources:

For more information on the coming of the American Revolution or the siege of Boston, as well as additional primary sources on these topics, visit the Massachusetts Historical Society's website:

The Coming of the American Revolution, 1764-1776: <http://www.masshist.org/revolution>

The Siege of Boston: <http://www.masshist.org/online/siege>

Suggested Activities:

Activity One: Learning to Think Like an Historian (one day)

As an introduction to the unit, students engage in discussion about the limits of the historical record and the challenge to historians of obtaining reliable information.

- 1) Students will complete the "[Mindwalk Activity](#)" from the [Library of Congress Learning Page](#).
- 2) Teacher will facilitate a discussion based on the following questions: How can the historical record be both huge and limited? How do we know what we know about history? How accurate is what we know? What factors contribute to the accuracy (or inaccuracy) of our knowledge about the past? How do historians make assertions about the past? What is a primary source? How do we know how reliable a source is?
- 3) Assign homework, readings and questions in document packet.

Activity Two: Mapping the Siege (one day)

In order to contextualize the events during the siege, students examine maps and discuss the connection of geography and history.

- 1) Students will examine map of Boston during the siege, available in document packet. *Note: a great interactive digital map of Boston during the period is available online at the Massachusetts Historical Society's website for teachers with internet access. "The Town of Boston in New England by Capt. John Bonner, 1722": http://www.masshist.org/online/massmaps/doc-viewer.php?old=1&item_id=1784.*
- 2) Teacher will project map (along with a current map of Boston for comparison) on an overhead projector and after a brief explanation of the logistics of the siege lead a discussion based on the following questions: What information can you get from the map? Where were each of the armies located? What can you guess about the inhabitants of both the town proper and the inhabitants of the surrounding areas? How reliable is this map as a source? Can you postulate on Washington's strategy? What might have been his challenges? What about the challenges of Howe? Can you speculate on other possible outcomes? How does geography affect history? Can you think of another event that was significantly affected by geography? How is Boston different today?

Activity Three: Discovering Besieged Boston (three to five days)

Over the course of the next three days, students will engage with various documents to obtain a first-hand account of the events of the siege.

- 1) Focusing on the documents in Section I and II of the primary source packet, the teacher will lead the students through a close reading and discussion of all or some of the selections and frame class discussions around the guiding questions included for each selection.
- 2) Depending on teacher preference, level of student comfort and ability with the sources and space/time constraints, some of the analysis may be conducted in groups, individually in class, or individually at home. (Students will probably need the most guidance with the manuscripts).

Possible extension: If school culture allows, teachers may consider creating a blog or wiki space for students to comment on and discuss the documents.

Activity Four: Abigail's Pen (one day)

As a follow up to the examination of the lives of Bostonians, students will spend one day reading Abigail Adams letters to her husband (who was serving at the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia) regarding her experience during the siege. These letters offer the perspective of a woman who is ardently supportive of the Continental troops.

- 1) Assign students to read Abigail's letters included in the document packet, either at home the previous night or in class.
- 2) Review the letters with the students, leading a discussion around the following questions: What is the tone of Abigail's writing? How is tone significant? What was the purpose of her letters? Do they contain bias? How do you know? How reliable are these letters as a source? How might her experiences have differed from those within the city? Is her perspective as a woman unique? Is her perspective as a woman whose husband was integrally involved in the rebellion unique? Why or Why not?

Activity Five: George Washington in Boston (one or two days)

In May of 1775, The Continental Congress commissioned George Washington as commander-in-chief of the newly formed Continental Army. From the very beginning, Washington encountered serious difficulties, yet nevertheless was successful in driving the British from the town of Boston. In this activity, students will investigate a series of document relating to Washington's experience in Boston.

- 1) Instruct students to read the documents in section III of their document packet, either at home or in class.
- 2) Lead a discussion of the sources around the following questions: What problems did Washington face as leader of this new army? How did he face those challenges? What can you surmise about Washington's character from these reading? About his leadership style? How might you evaluate Washington's performance in Boston? Did the Congress make a wise choice? Compare and contrast Washington with British generals Gage and Howe. How reliable is the information provided? Identify the significance of point of view and bias in the material.

Activity Six: The Evacuation (one day)

By March 5, 1776, the American Army had fortified Dorchester Heights so that their fortifications were visible to the British. By March 7, General Howe realized that Boston and its harbor were now indefensible in the face of artillery from the Heights and he decided to evacuate. On March 17, the British boarded their ships and evacuated the city, never to return. This evacuation is the subject of this activity.

- 1) Instruct students to review the documents in sections I-III of their packets, looking for first-hand accounts of the evacuation, either at home or in class.
- 2) Lead a discussion of the sources around the following questions: Evaluate the Continentals' plan for evacuation. What would you imagine was the rationale behind their strategy? Evaluate Gage and Howe's strategy during the siege? How might the outcome have been different? How reliable is the information we have about the evacuation? Identify the significance of point of view and bias in the material.

Conclusion:

On March 27 1776, the British sailed to Halifax, Nova Scotia. The Americans had no idea where the British were heading, but many including General Washington rightly assumed that New York City was their destination. From that point onward, the fighting of the Revolution would occur outside New England. But Boston had earned its rest. From the very first stirrings of Revolutionary fervor, Bostonians had stood at the forefront of the colonists struggle for liberty. They had paved the way for independence and will forever be remembered for their most ardent devotion to their cause.

- 1) At this point, the teacher may want to take some time to allow students to speculate on how the residents of Boston and its surrounding towns recovered in the wake of the siege. A great resource for the subject is Jacqueline Barbara Carr's book *After the Siege: A Social History of Boston, 1775-1800* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2005).
- 2) Towards assessment, the teacher may review the [Habits of Mind Handout](#) with the students, spending time to explain each habit and give examples. Also, the teacher may model how to complete the chart using examples from the documents.
- 3) At this point, the assessment may be assigned. The teacher should spend some time going over the Guidelines for Assessment Handout, making sure that the students understand the requirements and what is expected of them.

Possible Extensions to the Lesson:

- ◆ Facilitate a way for students to perform and/or publish the plays that they write in some public setting.
- ◆ Arrange a historical scavenger hunt, in which students visit some of the places mentioned in the document and bring back evidence of their visit.
- ◆ Encourage students to research ways in which the important events of the siege have been memorialized by succeeding generations.

HABITS OF MIND CHART

THEME	DESCRIPTION	How do these sources help you to acquire this habit?
1. Significance of the Past	...understand the significance of their past to their lives, both private and public and to their society.	
2. What's Important and What's Not	...distinguish between the important and the inconsequential, to develop the "discriminating memory" needed for discerning judgment in public and personal life.	
3. Historical Empathy	...perceive past events and issues as they were experienced by people at the time, to develop historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness.	
4. Shared Humanity	...acquire at one and the same time a comprehension of diverse cultures and of share humanity.	
5. Change and Consequences	...understand how things happen and how things change, how human interactions matter, but also how their consequences are shaped by the means of carrying them out, in a tangle between purpose and process.	
6. Change and Continuity	...comprehend the interplay of change and continuity, and avoid assuming that either is somehow more natural, or more to be expected, than the other.	
7. History is Unfinished Business	...prepare to live with uncertainties and exasperating-even perilous-unfinished business, realizing that not all 'problems' have solutions.	
8. Campaign Against Monocausality	...grasp the complexity of historical causation, respect particularity, and avoid excessively abstract generalizations.	

<p>9. History's Tentative Nature</p>	<p>...appreciate the often tentative nature of judgments about the past, and thereby avoid the temptation to seize upon particular "lessons" of history as cures for present ills.</p>	
<p>10. People Who Made a Difference</p>	<p>...recognize the importance of individuals who have made a difference in history, and the significance of personal character for both good and ill.</p>	
<p>11. The Unintended and Unexpected</p>	<p>...appreciate the force of the non-rational, the irrational, and the accidental in history and human affairs.</p>	
<p>12. Time and Place are Inseparable</p>	<p>...understand the relationship between geography and history as a matrix of time and place, and as a context for events.</p>	
<p>13. Evaluating Evidence</p>	<p>...read widely and critically in order to recognize the difference between fact and conjecture, between evidence and assertion, and thereby frame useful questions.</p>	