

# CAUSES OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: FOCUS ON BOSTON

A UNIT OF STUDY FOR GRADES 7-12

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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?

## 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.

## V. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The causes of the American Revolution can be traced to the economic, political and military interactions between Great Britain and the colonies during the previous century. Official British economic policy was based on the theory of mercantilism as stated in the Trade and Navigation Acts while unofficially lax British enforcement of the regulations allowed colonists to circumvent the rules with relative impunity. Meanwhile, frequent successful clashes with royal governors prompted an arrogance and defiance in colonial legislatures that fostered a growing British frustration at colonial provincialism. Furthermore, wartime experience had promoted a mutual contempt with the colonists disparaging British military ineptitude and the British voicing their disgust with the lack of military discipline and imperial commitment on the part of the colonies. These long-standing perceptions shaped the context wherein each side judged the other during the events that led to the American Revolution.

The victorious conclusion of the colonial wars of the mid-eighteenth century initiated dramatic changes in political and economic policies that hastened the onset of the American Revolution. For the British, military success had come at a high financial price, plunging the imperial treasury into debt. This financial crisis precipitated the passage of new revenue taxes as well as a stricter enforcement of trade policies. For the American colonies, the elimination of the French threat lessened their dependence for military and diplomatic support on Britain and allowed them to be more vociferous in their objections to British policies. The causes of the American Revolution can be found in the clash of these policies and perceptions within the context of changing political and economic relationships.

The American revolutionaries prided themselves on being more British than the British. The ideals that initiated colonial resistance to British dominance stemmed from the time-honored “rights of Englishmen.” Colonial rebels maintained that they were, in essence, seeking to sustain the very rights that the mother country had fought to preserve as part of the unwritten English constitution from the Magna Carta of 1215 to the English Bill of Rights that followed the Glorious Revolution. Colonial leaders, schooled in British law, understood that English subjects enjoyed certain fundamental rights that government could not violate and made their case on this basis.

Colonists, with memories of their wartime sacrifices still fresh, resented the passage of a series of acts following the French and Indian War. Parliament’s Proclamation of 1763, the Quartering Act (1765) and the Sugar Act (1764) seemed to testify that English colonists were being deprived of rights they assumed were guaranteed by the English constitution. Many colonists refused to believe that the maintenance of frontier stability and peace with Native Americans required the prevention of settlement west of the Appalachians. This, in turn, necessitated the presence of British troops which, not coincidentally, provided the British government with numerous political patronage appointments. The colonials considered access to western lands as the just deserts of their hard won victory and were shocked when the depleted treasury prompted Parliament to enact the

Sugar Act which imposed a heavy tax on imported sugar and created several new procedures designed to revitalize the customs service and eliminate smuggling. While these three new acts were grudgingly seen as within the authority of Parliament, they were unwelcome intrusions into the daily lives of the colonists. Moreover, they were unenforceable in most colonial circumstances and served only to antagonize. Petitions and boycotts ultimately led to the repeal of the Sugar Act, but the Proclamation and Quartering Act continued to plague imperial relations.

Colonial resistance was galvanized when it was perceived that Parliament had exceeded its authority by passing the Stamp Act, an internal tax purely to raise revenue. Throughout the colonies mob action prevented its implementation through the blockage of docks, the burning of stamps, the destruction of property, and threats against persons associated with the Stamp Act. Other Americans sought political redress through petitions and formal resolutions, ultimately uniting their efforts in the Stamp Act Congress. The Virginia Resolves in particular, written by Patrick Henry and circulated throughout the colonies, energized resistance. The issue polarized Parliament splitting its members along lines of both political interest (commercial v. landed) and constitutional interpretation (virtual representation v. direct representation). Intense American reaction coupled with Parliamentary paralysis forced the repeal of the controversial Stamp Act.

Humbled by this retreat, Parliament passed the Declaratory Act, reasserting its authority over the colonies. The continuing financial crisis forced Parliament to return to the less objectionable taxing of trade. The Townshend Acts imposed an indirect tax on certain enumerated articles such as lead, glass, paint, paper and tea. This less offensive tax elicited a more restrained American reaction in the form of boycotts, petitions and “circular letters” between colonial legislatures. Political crises were initiated in some colonies when colonial governors were ordered to dissolve any legislature that considered the “circular letters.” These methods of colonial resistance eventually resulted in the repeal of most of the Townshend Acts.

As the political controversies surrounding the Sugar Act, the Stamp Act, and the Townshend Acts fluctuated in the late 1760s, the presence of large contingents of British troops in New York and Boston became a constant source of irritation. The citizens of those port cities, already angered by British trade regulations, resisted efforts to provide housing (or colonial funding for housing) for the troops. In both cities, the presence of these troops created a variety of political disputes, a series of court cases, and frequent physical confrontations in the streets. British troops became the symbols of imperial oppression as well as convenient targets for radicals to vent their frustrations.

For their part, British troops found themselves in a conundrum: if they remained passive as ordered they promoted perceptions of British weakness and ineptitude; if they responded they confirmed fears of British oppression as well as being legally culpable for their violation of orders. This incendiary situation required only a spark to burst into flames. In Boston, the home of the Sons of

Liberty, several street incidents culminated in a violent confrontation on the night of March 5, 1770, in which five colonists died. The incident became known as the Boston Massacre.

The Boston Massacre became a defining moment. It solidified the views of some concerning British oppression while jarring others to a realization of the violence inherent in imperial confrontation. After the Boston Massacre an uneasy calm settled over the colonies, interrupted by annual commemorations and occasional incidents. Three years later, still desperate to generate revenue, Parliament increased the tax on tea while exempting it from some of the trade regulations that increased shipping costs. The combined effect was an actual reduction in the retail price of tea which, it was hoped, would circumvent colonial opposition to the increased tax on tea. Recognizing this ploy, radical leaders determined to destroy the tea before its tempting low price could fracture colonial resistance against British taxation. On December 16, 1773, the Sons of Liberty delivered those of weaker resolve from temptation by dumping the tea into Boston Harbor.

This audacious act, known as the Boston Tea Party, required a Parliamentary response of equal gravity. Measures were passed such as the closing of the port of Boston, the annulment of the Massachusetts colonial charter, the re-organization of the Massachusetts government to increase the power and authority of crown appointees, the re-establishment of admiralty courts and the issuing of arrest warrants for radical leaders. As if these actions weren't enough, the Quebec Act was seen as an affront to all of the colonies by officially recognizing the Catholic religion and extending Quebec's jurisdiction into the trans-Appalachian territories, an area coveted by many of the colonies. Colonial assemblies and town meetings moved by concern for the Bostonians and fear of similar sanctions on their colony, elected delegates to the First Continental Congress to issue a united condemnation of these "Intolerable Acts."

The confrontation around Boston escalated in September, 1774 when British troops seized the military supplies of the local militia at Charlestown and Cambridge, prompting the creation of local military units known as "minutemen." A similar British operation to Lexington and Concord seven months later was resisted by these minutemen, initiating the American Revolution.