

Lesson 10: The Battle of Bunker Hill

Historical Career Assumed

- Detective

Historical Skills Practiced

- Close Reading
- Interpreting primary sources
- Interpretation
- Organizing well organized arguments

Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students will act as detectives to uncover symbols and meanings in primary sources about the Battle of Bunker Hill. In this primary source investigation, students will discuss how each primary source impacted the colonists for whom the source was created. They will also identify why there is so little known about the Black men and women who were involved in the events leading up to the American Revolution. Students will also consider why colonial artists depicted this event in different ways.

Students will practice skills in corroboration, rationalizing historical perspectives, and comparing competing historical narratives by looking at two different perspectives of the Battle of Bunker Hill within their primary source investigation.

Content Question

- What are two different depictions of the Battle of Bunker Hill?

Topical Essential Questions

Why are Black men and women hardly portrayed in artifacts and sources about the American Revolution? How does this portrayal impact our interpretation today?

Overarching Essential Question:

- What are the causes of the American Revolution?

Learning Objectives

- Students will be able to analyze and explain the two perspectives and depictions of the Battle of Bunker Hill through a primary source investigation.
- Students will be able to discuss the ramifications in present time for the lack of inclusion of Black men and women in the events leading up to the American Revolution.

Instructional Plan

Do Now:

Do you think that war was the only solution to solving the problems the colonists had against the British or could there have been alternative solutions? What could these solutions have looked like?

Have students talk in groups to discuss if they think there could have been alternative solutions to the Boston Massacre, the Boston Tea Party, and the American Revolution in general or if violence was the only way for the colonists to have their voice heard. Have them support, extend, or challenge their responses using evidence and reasoning from what we have learned so far in this unit.

Introduction:

Share with students that today they will act as detectives to examine the Battle of Bunker Hill, which is known as one of the first battles of the American Revolution. In this investigation, students will identify the symbols and purposes in two primary sources depicting the Battle of Bunker Hill, and they will explain why each artist depicted each painting the way they did.

What do detectives do?

Have students flip to the beginning of their almanac titled, “Historical Jobs” and have them write “Detective” on the next line down. Ask students what they think detectives do? While detectives often work for members of law enforcement agencies, the job of a detective in general is to investigate different people and events. For today, students will be detectives to find the meanings in primary source paintings about the Battle of Bunker Hill.

Historical skills practice:

Next, have students flip to the “Historical Skills” section of their almanac and write down “Rationalizing historical perspectives.” In today’s lesson, students will try to understand why the artists chose to depict certain events and symbols the way they did. To do this, students must rationalize the artists’ perspective to try to understand what they thought and why they thought that way. This is a very difficult skill to accomplish, because we see everything through the lens of our present day, it is so difficult to try to detach ourselves from our current time to understand why people thought the way they did in the past. Another skill that students will practice today is to “compare competing historical narratives.” In their investigation, students will look at two versions of the Battle of Bunker Hill and will try to argue and compare the differing narratives each artist is trying to tell.

The Battle of Lexington and Concord summary:

To provide students with a foundation for understanding the events that led up to the Battle of Bunker Hill, give students a few minutes to read, highlight, and annotate the following summary.

After the Boston Tea Party in 1773, British troops quartered in the town of Boston using their warships to keep Boston harbor closed. These actions cut off trade, crippled the economy, and put colonists out of work. British soldiers and colonists, now living in proximity, frequently brawled in the streets and in the taverns. People who had never paid much attention to political affairs now became overt or secret supporters of one side or the other. Biased broadsides and newspaper reports fostered enmity. Tensions came to a head on April 18, 1775, when British General Thomas Gage, appointed royal governor of Massachusetts, sent 700 British soldiers to Lexington and Concord to confiscate arms and ammunition being accumulated by the colonists.

Some of the colonists, forewarned about British troop movements, were waiting on the Lexington Green when the British arrived the next morning. To this day no one knows for sure who fired first, but a shot rang out. The British soldiers fired a volley into the colonial militia, killing eight men and wounding 10. The British then moved on to Concord where minutemen drove back three British infantry units guarding Concord's North Bridge. On their subsequent march back to Boston they were peppered by patriot snipers. By the time the redcoats reached Boston, they had suffered 273 casualties compared with fewer than 100 for the patriots.

Engravings in local newspapers and broadsides incorrectly reported that the British, after attacking Lexington and Concord, raided and pillaged property all the way back to Boston. That news enraged patriots throughout the colonies. Within 48 hours, militiamen from Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts gathered in and around Cambridge, across the Charles River from Boston. The many differences that had separated the various colonies, including different religions, systems of government, and lifestyles, were set aside for a greater cause.

After students read this summary, explain that the First Battle of the American Revolution, the Battle of Lexington and Concord is now immortalized as “The Shot Heard Around the World.” Ask students to discuss in partners why they think it is known as this? Share that for the first time in modern history, a small group of people, the American colonists known as militiamen, tried to fight the world’s largest superpower at the time. The colonists were really against all odds with this battle, and somehow, they managed to take a lead against the British. It was an inspiring moment for many other people who were oppressed by their leaders which resulted in a wave of other revolutions around the world such as the French Revolution and the Haitian Revolution.

Specifically explain that the effects of the Battle of Lexington and Concord on the American colonists’ morale and spirit was strong. While the colonists were severely impacted by the Battle of Lexington and Concord and had many casualties and deaths compared to the British, they proved to themselves that they had the ability to stand up to the British, the most powerful army in the world.

Battle of Bunker Hill activity explanation

A few months after the Battle of Lexington and Concord was the Battle of Bunker Hill which started on June 17, 1775. This battle is what we will be investigating in more detail today.

While the British defeated the Americans at the Battle of Bunker Hill, it was a narrow win and it showed the growing strength of the patriot forces. By the following summer, the American Revolution had officially broken out, which paved the way for the creation of the United States of America. Today we will investigate two primary source paintings depicting the

Battle of Bunker Hill. In each source we will think about the purposes, messages, and symbols each painting represents and why each artist chose their particular perspective.

Detective Activity, Bernard Roman:

Split students up into groups of three and have them look at the following image in their almanac.



As a whole class, source and contextualize this image together. Share that the artist who painted this picture was a man named Bernard Romans who was a cartographer. He was not involved in the Battle of Bunker Hill, so he drew this sketch based on his own knowledge and from descriptions of people who were involved in the battle. The bottom of the painting says, “An exact view of the late Battle at Charlestown (Which is now known as the Battle of Bunker Hill), June 17th, 1775.

In their groups, have students discuss what they see in this image. Tell them to remember that the British are the “red coats” and the American militiamen are the ones in blue.

- What is this image depicting?
- Why did Bernard Romans depict the battle in this way?
- Why did Romans choose this moment in the battle to depict?

After students finish discussing and writing their responses in their almanac, explain that the image is depicting the British warships firing at Charlestown, which is in the right of the image, which was eventually burned completely down. Share that in this image the British army is advancing in lines against the colonial militiamen. If you look closer at the image students should see that the left side of the British line is falling apart under American fire.

Have students share why they think the artist depicted the battle in this way? After some groups share out, explain that while it may have been an accurate depiction of the battle, it doesn't account for why the artist chose this specific moment in the battle to depict. Explain that while this image shows the British crushing the city of Charlestown, it also shows that the American militiamen are holding strong and are still impacting the British army as seen in the image. It is an image that shows the Americans as underdogs, but also as forceful competitors who are not completely overpowered by the British.

Detective Activity continued, John Trumbull:

Next, have students in their same groups work through answering the following questions about this image of the Battle of Bunker Hill painted by John Trumbull:

- What is this image depicting?
- Why do you think John Trumbull depicted the battle in this way?
- Why do you think John Trumbull choose this moment in the battle to depict?
- How does Trumbull's depiction of the Battle of Bunker Hill differ from Bernard Romans' depiction?
- How is this painting similar to the Death of General Wolfe painting by Benjamin West?



Whole Class Discussion:

After students have an opportunity to work through these questions with their partners, have students come back together for a whole class conversation. Ask students what they see in this image, what do they think the message and purpose of this painting is? In this image, we see a dying colonial militiaman laying on the ground with a group of militia men around him fighting off the British. The painting is supposed to show the height of the Battle of Bunker Hill when the British defeated the Patriots and the Patriots were forced to retreat. Ask students to share where in the image is the British victory depicted?

Next, have students make inferences as to why this particular moment of a Patriot defeat would be the focus of his painting? They may have many guesses, and there is not one completely correct answer, but explain to students that John Trumbull may have also had British sympathies. If they look to the center right of the image, they see a prominent British leader also dying in the Battle. Give students the background information that John Trumbull studied art with Benjamin West and may have developed his British sympathies while working with him.

While the British death is a large component of the image, ask students why the Patriot death is more of the focus and why our eyes are more drawn to that? Share that the dying militiaman in the picture is Joseph Warren, who was a major general of the colonial militia but insisted on fighting on Bunker Hill as an ordinary private.

Ask students why they think that Trumbull would make Warren's death the central focus of this painting? Have students look at Benjamin West's "Death of Wolfe" painting again and have

them compare and contrast Trumbull's painting with his. Why did Benjamin West make General Wolfe the central focus of his painting? Both artists wanted to memorialize each leader as a hero for the growing American nation. For both military leaders, they were well known and beloved by the citizens. When the citizens saw them honored and enshrined in this way, it established a reminder of American tenacity to fight for a cause you believe in and to never give up. This painting served as one of the most influential paintings to rally the citizens to officially go to war against the British in the American Revolution and is still seen today as a reminder of hope against all odds.

Black experiences leading up to the American Revolution:

Ask students to summarize in partners how this image portrays the ideals of the American Revolution. After they discuss, come back together as a whole class. Have students look at the bottom right corner of the painting. The Black man behind the soldier was a man named Peter Salem. This man fought in many battles leading up to the American Revolution and through the Revolution itself. Ask students why they think Peter Salem was depicted in this painting? Ask students to talk in partners about why so little is known about the Black men and women who fought in the American Revolution? Share with them that when you Google "leaders in the American Revolution" almost all the search results are wealthy, slave owning White men. Why is this? What impact does this lack of available information and knowledge of the history of Black experiences have on us as learners today? As historians, how can we combat these injustices of silence?

Exit Slip:

How will you bring the voices of marginalized communities such as Black men and women and Indigenous men and women into your final project?

Lesson Sources:

<https://www.americanrevolutioninstitute.org/lesson-plans/imagining-the-revolution/imagining-the-battle-of-bunker-hill/>

<https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/battles-of-lexington-and-concord>