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The Constitutional Sources Project

ConSource Revolutionary War Unit Guide

Introduction

History is the chronicle of choices made by actors/agents/protagonists who, in very specific contexts, unearth opportunities and inevitably encounter impediments. During the Revolutionary War people of every stripe navigated turbulent waters. As individuals and groups struggled for their own survival, they also shaped the course of the nation. Whether a general or a private, male or female, free or enslaved, each became a player in a sweeping drama. The instructive sessions outlined here are tailored for upper elementary and middle school students, who encounter history most readily through the lives of individual historical players. Here, students actually *become* those players, confronted with tough and often heart-wrenching choices that have significant consequences. History in all its complexity comes alive. It is a convoluted, thorny business, far more so than streamlined timelines suggest, yet still accessible on a personal level to students at this level.

Instructive Sessions

1. General Washington's Council of War. In September 1775, the newly formed Continental Army surrounded the British garrison in Boston. Three months earlier, when British forces tried to break out of the city by attacking Breed's Hill (known since as the Battle of Bunker Hill), they suffered devastating losses. After that, neither side dared make a dramatic move. Frustrated with the military stalemate, the Continental Army's Commander-in-Chief, George Washington, contemplated a direct assault on the city. Before making such a move, however, he consulted his Council of War. Students convene as that Council. They read selections of actual proceedings and consider key factors— numbers, geography, morale, and strategies. After weighing the options and coming to a decision, they are presented with the historical outcome: the Council advised against an assault, and Washington is swayed. Despite the top-down military chain of command, this was a republican army, unlike any other on the globe.

2. Starving Soldiers: Joseph Plumb Martin. The winter camp at Morristown, NJ, in 1779-1780, was even harsher than that at Valley Forge two years earlier. Snowbound soldiers, without a morsel of food for four days at a stretch, were forced to eat their dogs. Now it is spring, but food is still short. How long can this go on? How can soldiers be expected to fight in such a state? Private Joseph Plumb Martin described their plight:

“The men were now exasperated beyond endurance; they could not stand it any longer. They saw no alternative but to starve to death, or break up the army, give all up and go home. This was a hard matter for the soldiers to think upon. They were truly patriotic, they loved their country, and they had already suffered everything short of death in its cause; and now, after such extreme hardships to give up all was too much, but to starve to death was too much also. What was to be done? Here was the army starved and naked, and their

country sitting still and expecting the army to do notable things while fainting from sheer starvation.”

A number of privates from Connecticut are talking within their log hut. No officers are present. After assuming the identity of specific characters—age, occupation, family status, and remaining time of enlistment—students discuss their options. Should they continue to serve without complaint, register complaints with their officers, refuse to obey further orders unless conditions improve, mutiny, or desert? They are advised of possible consequences: thirty-nine lashes for desertion, possible execution for mutiny, and so on. “Remember,” students are told, “your own personal survival, and perhaps the fate of your country, might hang on your decision.”

3. A Farm Wife’s Struggles: Sarah Hodgkins

When Joseph Hodgkins, a Minuteman from Massachusetts, answered the Lexington Alarm in 1775, he left his wife Sarah at home with a six-week-old infant and two other small children. Joseph did not return after battles at Lexington and Concord, but, along with a multitude of soldiers, instead laid siege to Boston. In her husband’s absence, Sarah tended the children, mended the torn garments Joseph sent home, and performed myriad tasks that kept the farm intact. Originally, Joseph had told Sarah he would not reenlist when his term expired at the end of 1775. But when that time neared, he wavered: “If we Due not Exarte our selves in this gloris Cause our all is gon and we made slaves of for Ever.”

In reading the Hodgkins’ correspondence, students see that both husband and wife had to weigh public duty against personal needs. Over time, military sacrifices multiplied. Joseph did reenlist for another year, and toward the end of his duty he considered reenlisting for three more. Students are asked: If you were Sarah Hodgkins, what would you say to Joseph now? They can write letters to Joseph or discuss what they would say. Teacher then presents Sarah’s forthright response: “It will troble me very much if you Should ingage [enlist] again.” Joseph stayed in the army, fighting for his country. Sarah’s letters became more harsh, and Joseph finally came home, shortly before the end of his three-year enlistment.

4. Iroquois Council: Choosing Sides

Both Britain and the United States attempted to garner support from Native peoples. The class convenes as an Iroquois council in upstate New York in 1777, joined by a British emissary who has come with a lavish display of gifts and an American who can’t match the gifts but presents his case nonetheless. True to tradition, all Iroquois adults attend this council. Students assume the personas of young warriors or mothers or older chiefs, etc. Students are presented with relevant factors to consider—the numbers, strength, and allegiances of nearby white settlers; the decisions other Native nations have made; the effect of previous wars on the Iroquois people; the British promise that Native people west of the Appalachian Mountains can keep their land. Should they side with the British, side with the Americans, or attempt to stay neutral? The simulated Iroquois council makes its decisions. They then learn how each of the six Iroquois nations in reality fared after actually siding with the British or with the Americans.

5. Enslaved Americans: Seeking Freedom

When British vessels sailed up the Potomac River in 1781, men and women enslaved to George Washington considered whether or not to flee to British forces, hoping to be set free. In this lesson, each student takes on the persona of a particular Mount Vernon (home of George Washington) slave and considers whether to hazard an escape. Aware that one member in the class has been designated a slave informant, students deliberate secretly in small groups. To make calculated decisions, they consider information or rumors that did in fact circulate in slave quarters: the 1772 Sommersett decision against slavery in England; Lord Dunmore's 1775 promise of freedom to slaves who joined the British cause; General Clinton's 1779 proclamation that those who fled from patriot masters would find work with the British, although this time freedom was not actually promised. Students make strategic choices—they might have to leave children and older relatives behind; they might have seen recaptured slaves tortured; they hear that runaways who are captured are often sent the dreaded West Indies. The lesson closes with a presentation of the historical outcome: seventeen enslaved men and women did in fact flee from Washington at that time. The fate of slaves escaping to the British is pursued further in lesson number 6.

6. Black Refugees: David George

After the war, 3,000 African Americans who aided the British were transported on ships from New York for Canada. This lesson features David George, a preacher whose detailed memoir appeared in a religious journal. Selections recount his harsh treatment as a slave, his repeated attempts to escape, and his eventual road to freedom. Once free, however, his trials were not over. In Canada he tells of a mob raiding his house and threatening bodily harm. Students are asked: Would you continue to preach in the face of such threats? They are then presented with the historical outcome: "I stayed and preached, and the next day they came a beat me with sticks, and drove me into the swamp."

After moving to a different location, David George and his family faced additional adversity. Then, in 1791, George learned of Sierra Leone, where former slaves were encouraged to settle. Students are asked: Should David George and his family journey across the Atlantic to this distant land, not knowing what they might encounter there? The lesson concludes with the historic outcome: George and some 1,200 others made the journey. They had more opportunity in Sierra Leone, but Britain continued to control the new colony, and it was not quite the Promised Land some had envisioned.

7. Wartime Pacifists: Quakers

During the Revolutionary War, one of every 30 free Americans belonged to a religious sect (Quakers, Shakers, Moravians, Mennonites, Amish, Dunkers, or Schwenkfelders) that opposed fighting in wars. In this simulation, students imagine they are Quakers who have been drafted to serve in the Continental Army. They learn that in the Revolutionary War, a person who was drafted could either join the army or pay for a substitute to serve in his place. This presents a quandary: Will a Quaker be violating his religious beliefs if he pays for a substitute? Students confront this on multiple levels. First, what would they do as individuals? Next, what would the communities decide? And, finally, what does an individual do if his decision conflicts with that of his religious community? Having examined pacifism in the Revolutionary War, students will be better able to view the problems pacifists faced in other wars, as well as the problems that pacifists presented to wartime governments.

8. Oaths of Allegiance: Moravians and Andrew Giering

In this simulation, students play the role of Andrew Giering, a Moravian pacifist who refuses to take an oath of allegiance to Pennsylvania's Revolutionary government. Students learn why the oath conflicts with Giering's religious beliefs, but they also encounter the consequences of his refusal: imprisonment. While in jail his family struggles, but a Moravian leader urges him to hold firm. Students are asked: If you were Giering, would you now take the oath so you can get of jail and help your family, or would you stay true to your religious beliefs? Giering's example personifies the recurring conflicts between deeply held religious beliefs and the demands of government. The lesson can be used as an unbiased introduction to the separation of church and state and to various contemporary issues that arise when interpreting that basic premise.

9. Retribution and a Civil War in the South: Thomas Brown

The Revolutionary War in the southern backcountry turned into a brutal civil war between patriots and loyalists. Each violent act spurred retribution, thereby escalating the conflict. In this lesson, students take on three roles. First, they are an angry group of patriots confronting Thomas Brown, a prominent loyalist. When Brown refuses to cease his opposition to the Revolution, how should they respond? After positing possible actions, they are presented with the historical outcome: Brown was partially scalped, tarred and feathered, and branded in the sole of his foot. Next, they become Brown: how might he respond to such harsh treatment? Again, after considering options, they learn the historical outcome: Brown organized backcountry loyalists into a fighting force called the King's Rangers, enlisted the support of Native Americans, and led many raids against patriots. Finally, near the close of the war, Brown was captured, and this leads to the concluding simulation. Students are asked: If you were a relative of someone who had been killed by Brown's Rangers, and Brown was held in captivity near you, would you try to confront him personally? The outcome: one woman tried to knife him, and then, having failed, issued a vitriolic verbal assault that students hear or read. By playing multiple roles and switching sides, students can *feel* how one violent act leads to the next—the powerful dynamic that feeds warfare and makes peaceful resolution increasingly difficult.

10. Retribution at the Highest Level: George Washington and Charles Asgill

Near the close of the war, a group of New York patriots captured and killed a loyalist named Philip White. Enraged loyalists quickly retaliated by hanging a patriot they held as prisoner, Joshua Huddy. General Washington was outraged at this vengeful killing of a helpless prisoner, who had been chosen at random. Unless those who killed Huddy were handed over to the patriots, he said, he would retaliate by taking the life of a prisoner whom the patriots held. Huddy's killers were not delivered, so Washington made good on his pledge. The victim, chosen at random, would be Charles Asgill, a nineteen-year-old British captain who had surrendered at Yorktown. But did this young officer deserve to die for a crime in which he had played no part? Although many people, even patriots, pleaded that Asgill should not be killed, Washington held firm. Although he too was "exceedingly distressed" by the situation, military honor demanded retaliation. His decision was "purely of a Military nature," Washington said.

But then Asgill himself made an impassioned appeal, as did his family. These "work too hard on my humanity," Washington finally admitted, yet if reversed himself now, he might appear weak. Students are asked to ponder Washington's dilemma—if they were in his shoes, would they spare Asgill, despite the prior determination to even the score with Britain? Would that retreat set a bad

example? The lesson concludes with the historical outcome: Washington dodged the issue by asking Congress to make the call, and Congress, bowing to pressure from France (Asgill's mother was French), set the prisoner free. Through this lesson, students will see how the strange logic of retribution can ensnare even the most powerful leaders.

11. Parliament: Will Britain Continue the War after Yorktown?

Textbooks say that in October 1781, when General Cornwallis surrendered over 7,000 British soldiers at Yorktown, the war was over. This lesson opens with a question that most texts fail to ask: Why didn't Britain concede defeat four years earlier, when General Burgoyne surrendered a similar number at Saratoga? Students offer preliminary conjectures and are then presented with new and puzzling information. After its defeat at Yorktown, Britain still had some 40,000 soldiers—over 5 times the number that surrendered and almost 4 times as many as were in the Continental Army—in North America and in the Caribbean. These were stationed in Halifax, New York, Charleston, Savannah, St. Augustine, and the West Indies. The class finds these locations on the map.

So why didn't Britain continue to fight? To answer that, students convene as the British Parliament late in 1781, after hearing the news from Yorktown. They are given background information. In 1777 Britain fought American rebels exclusively, but now France, Spain, and the Netherlands have joined the American cause and other European nations are providing aid to Britain's enemies. The war is global, as students recognize when pinpointing on a world map other contested areas—the Caribbean, the North Sea, Gibraltar, Minorca, the Cape of Good Hope, India. Should Britain continue to devote military resources to suppressing the American rebellion, as King George III is still requesting? Hold onto the valuable ports they control in North America, but not try to conquer the continent? Give up on the United States altogether and focus on maintaining the rest of the British Empire? After voting as Parliament, students are presented with the historical outcome: Britain gave up the fight for America, but only after it had suffered losses elsewhere. This lesson encourages students to view their nation's founding moment from a global perspective.

This lesson concludes the Revolutionary War unit. The nation as a whole was free from British rule, but for individuals and groups, "freedom" was not always so simple. The overarching message is that real people, not paper heroes, made and endured the American Revolution. Any war has its hardships, and this was no exception. As students study key historical events, they keep in mind that people make history—not just the leaders, but others who lived through troubled times and in their own ways contributed to the outcomes.