

CONSOURCE



The Constitutional Sources Project

Revolutionary War Unit

Starving Soldiers: Joseph Plumb Martin

TIME AND GRADE LEVEL

One 45 or 50 minute class period in a **Grade 4-8**.

PURPOSE AND CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT QUESTIONS

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.

In this simulation, elementary or middle school students become privates in the Continental Army who are not receiving adequate rations. It is spring of 1780, and they have just survived the coldest winter in recorded history on the mid-Atlantic East Coast, with no food for days on end—but food is *still* scant, even after the weather has warmed. They want to register their complaint, but how forcibly should they do so? Should they resort to extreme measures, like mutiny or desertion? What might they do short of that? Students placed in this situation will be able to internalize hardships faced by common soldiers in the Revolutionary War. They will also see that people facing tough times have choices even when circumscribed by external constraints, and they will gain practice in considering alternate methods of protest, deliberating on the consequences of their actions rather than settling for knee-jerk responses.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

* Students will be able to cite the hardships faced by soldiers at Morristown, NJ, during the “hard winter” of 1779-1780.

* Students will be able to demonstrate that hardships faced by soldiers in the Revolutionary War continued long after the notorious winter at Valley Forge.

* Students will be able to explain that weather alone was not to blame for hardships that soldiers faced; they were not receiving food because the supply chain was broken.

* Students will be better able to respond to hardships with mature deliberation.

* Students will be able to incorporate experiences of common soldiers into the overarching narrative of the Revolutionary War.

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON

Prefatory homework:

Handout A: The “Hard Winter” at Morristown

In class:

1. Homework review and discussion: 5-10 minutes
2. Presentation of soldiers’ options: 15 minutes
3. Students, as soldiers, debate their options: 15-20 minutes
4. Presentation of historical outcome: 5-10 minutes

Summary Homework / Extended Activities

MATERIALS

Background Handout (Students read.)

- A. The “Hard Winter” at Morristown

Classroom Handouts (Teacher presents or students read this material.)

- B. Soldiers’ Options—Endure, Resist, or Desert?
- C. Historical Outcome: Food at Last

Vocabulary List

PREFATORY HOMEWORK

Distribute **Handout A: The “Hard Winter” at Morristown**. Go over instructions on that sheet.

CLASS ACTIVITIES: 45-50 MINUTES

1. HOMEWORK REVIEW AND DISCUSSION: 5-10 minutes

Open the discussion by asking students to compare the winter camps Valley Forge, PA, and Morristown, NJ. Ask for a few lurid details. Students share their personal responses as time permits.

2. PRESENTATION OF SOLDIERS' OPTIONS: 15 minutes

Distribute **Handout B. Soldiers' Options—Endure, Resist, or Desert?** The quotation from Joseph Plumb Martin should be read aloud—slowly and with appropriate emphasis—by the teacher or by a talented student who has rehearsed it.

Go over the options listed. This might work best if students can read the options as they are being explained. Define “mutiny” and “desert.”

Before starting the simulation, explain “terms of enlistment” and note that most soldiers had signed up for three years. Assign each student a specific term of enlistment: some have only six months left to serve, others a year and one-half, and some two and one-half years. Note that when considering whether to desert or even mutiny, student soldiers might consider how long they have left to serve before they can legally leave the army.

3. STUDENTS, AS SOLDIERS, DEBATE THEIR OPTIONS: 15-20 minutes

In breakout groups, student soldiers consider the alternatives. Instruct student to talk only in small groups among their friends—they don't want someone to “squeal” to an officer. If officers learn about their discussion and possible plans, they might be punished before they have a chance to do anything.

4. PRESENTATION OF HISTORICAL OUTCOME: 5-10 minutes

Teacher presents or students read **Handout C. Historical Outcome: Food at Last.**

Possibly broaden the discussion: even when a situation limits choices, people have options about how to deal with their difficulties.

Possibly carry the discussion forward to today: what sacrifices do those who serve in the military have to make now?

SUMMARY HOMEWORK / EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

1. Many years after the war had ended, Joseph Plumb Martin wrote a book about his seven years as a soldier. It is generally considered the best firsthand account of the American Revolution ever written, and it also great fun to read. The original title was *A Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Dangers and Sufferings of a Revolutionary Soldier, Interspersed with Anecdotes of Incidents That Occurred Within His Own Observation*. Later

editions have shorter titles, and any of these will do. Just look up his name, get a copy from the library, bookstore, or online, and start reading. Enjoy!

2. Chapter 2 of Ray Raphael's *People's History of the American Revolution* features firsthand accounts written by Martin and four others who fought in the war: Jeremiah Greenman, Joseph Hodgkins (he appears with his wife Sarah in the ConSource lesson plan "**Sarah Hodgkins: A Farm Wife's Struggles**"), Ebenezer Fox, and James Collins. Write about any of these. When possible, consult their own words. (References to their letters, diaries, or journals are in the endnotes to *People's History*.)

3. Textbooks commonly feature the hardships faced by Revolutionary soldiers during the winter they spent at Valley Forge (1777-1778). Those were hard times, but the weather was not nearly so harsh as it would be two years later at Morristown. Compare the weather statistics for those two winters, cited in Ray Raphael, *Founding Myths*, chapter 5 – the section called "A Tale of Two Winters." Why do you think textbooks leave out the coldest winter?

4. Talk with a person who has served, or is still serving, in the armed forces. What sacrifices do those in the military have to endure today?

Vocabulary for “Starving Soldiers: Joseph Plumb Martin”

denominated — called, labeled

desert — run away from the army

desertion — the act of running away from the army

enlist/enlistment — sign up to serve for a specific time in the army (or, later, in the navy, marines, or air force)

execution — being put to death for breaking a law

mutiny — soldiers rebelling against their officers

patriotic — doing what you think is right for your country

rations — the amount of food given to soldiers for each meal

term of enlistment — the time a soldier agrees to stay in the army. The most common terms of enlistment in the Revolutionary War were one year and three years.

victuals — food

Handout A: The “Hard Winter” at Morristown

American soldiers faced hardships during the winter of 1777-1778, when they camped at Valley Forge, PA. They were often cold and hungry, and history books often say that. But the Valley Forge winter was actually no colder than most others. The *coldest* winter that soldiers endured came two years later, when the Continental Army camped at Morristown, New Jersey. In fact, that was the coldest winter *ever* recorded in northeastern United States, even up to this day.

During that amazing winter of 1779-1780 the New York harbor froze over. Horse-drawn sleighs loaded with firewood could cross on the ice from Long Island to Manhattan Island to New Jersey—and that has never happened since. Rivers froze over as far south as Virginia and North Carolina. Even salt water in the ocean, which rarely freezes, froze solid. In Morristown, storms dumped several feet of snow on the army’s camp. Once soldiers had eaten the food that was already there, no more could arrive because horses and carts couldn’t make their way through the deep snowdrifts.

Joseph Plumb Martin, a young soldier from Connecticut, wrote about the suffering he and other men faced at Morristown:

“The winter of 1779 and ’80 was very severe; it has been denominated [called] ‘the hard winter,’ and hard it was to the army in particular. The period of the revolution has repeatedly been styled ‘the times that tried men’s souls.’ I often found that those times not only tried men’s souls, but their bodies too; I know they did mine.

“At one time it snowed the greater part of four days successively, and there fell nearly as many feet deep of snow. We were absolutely, literally starved. I do solemnly declare that I did not put a single morsel of victuals [food] into my mouth for four days and as many nights, except a little black birch bark which I gnawed off a stick of wood, if that can be called victuals. I saw several of the men roast their old shoes and eat them, and I was afterwards informed by one of the officers’ waiters, that some of the officers killed and ate a favorite little dog that belonged to one of them. If this was not ‘suffering’ I request to be informed what can pass under that name; if ‘suffering’ like this did not ‘try men’s souls,’ I confess that I do not know what could.”

INSTRUCTIONS: Try to imagine yourself in that situation, and write a few sentences about how you might respond. Do you think you could get through such tough times? Do you think you could eat old shoes or bark from sticks? If your life depended on it, would you kill and eat a dog? Are you surprised that soldiers in the Revolutionary War ate those things to survive?

Handout B: Soldiers' Options—Endure, Resist, or Desert?

Winter turned to spring and the weather warmed, but soldiers *still* could not get enough food. When soldiers had no food because of the weather, they had no choice but to bear it, but freezing weather was no longer the problem — *food delivery* was the problem. Congress, which ran the army, did not have much money to buy food from farmers. Even when it could buy food, that food was slow to arrive at the Morristown camp. The soldiers felt cheated. They had faced near starvation during the hardest winter ever. They didn't blame their country for that. But they blamed it now. As soldiers, they risked their lives for a country that wasn't even feeding them.

How long could this go on? How could soldiers fight if they were hungry all the time? Joseph Plumb Martin, who had joined the army at age sixteen, described what he and his fellow soldiers were thinking about doing:

“The men 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, but their country was sitting still and expecting the army to do notable things while fainting from sheer starvation.”

Imagine that you are a private soldier at that time. You and your friends are talking within your log hut about what you might do. No officers are present. Should you:

- Continue to serve in the army without complaining?
- Complain to your officers?
- Refuse to obey any orders from your officers until you get better rations?
- Mutiny?
- Desert?

As you consider your options, take into account the possible consequences:

- Thirty-nine lashes for desertion
- Fewer lashes for disobeying an officer
- Possible execution for mutiny

Also consider your term of enlistment—the amount of time you must still serve before you are allowed to leave the army without being punished.

Finally, remember this: What's best for you might not be what's best for the country, and what's best for the country might not be what's best for you. It's a difficult decision, a “tough call.”

Handout C. Historical Outcome—Food at Last

Joseph Martin and his fellow soldiers chose to make a forceful show of their anger. “We had borne as long as human nature could endure, and to bear longer we considered folly,” Martin wrote. One day, while on parade, the privates began “growling like soreheaded dogs, snapping at the officers, and acting contrary to their orders.” This led to a series of events sometimes called a “mutiny in the Connecticut line.” Privates challenged the authority of officers. At one point, they even held bayonets to the chests of those in command. But the soldiers were not trying to take control of the army. They only wanted to gain some respect and increase their rations. They did what they had to do, no more—and they achieved results: “Our stir did us some good in the end,” Martin reported, “for we had provisions directly after.”