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Primary Sources for Elementary Students
1763-1775

When I'm curating primary sources for elementary students about the buildup to the American Revolution, I remind myself that many may never have heard of the Stamp Act, the Boston Tea Party, or even the American Revolution itself. At this level, my goal isn't for students to memorize a long list of events and dates. Instead, I want them to begin building foundational historical thinking skills by asking questions, making observations, drawing inferences, and considering multiple perspectives.

To do that, I rely heavily on maps, artifacts, images, songs, and shorter texts that make historical events and abstract ideas such as protest, taxation, liberty, and resistance feel more concrete and accessible. These sources help students connect with the past in tangible ways and provide natural opportunities to practice close observation and evidence-based thinking. The sources in this collection are intended to help students explore the growing tensions between Great Britain and its North American colonies while developing the skills historians use to investigate the past.

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Source & Citation	Brief Description	Guiding Questions	How I Would Use it with Students
The Proclamation Line, 1766 Paterson, D. (1766). Containment of His Majesty's forces in N. America [Map]. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/exhibitions/two-georges/about-this-exhibition/british-beginnings/expanding-the-british-empire/the-proclamation-line/	This map shows the Proclamation Line established by the British in 1763 after the French and Indian War. The line followed the Appalachian Mountains and prohibited colonial settlement west of it. Intended to reduce conflict with Native nations, the policy frustrated many colonists who hoped to acquire western land and became an early source of tension between Britain and the colonies.	• What do you notice first about this map? • Why do you think Britain created this boundary line? • Who might have supported this decision? Who might have been upset by it? • How might this map reveal growing tensions between Britain and the colonies?	As we enter into a new topic– the rising tension points that led to the American Revolution– I like to begin my lessons by activating students' prior knowledge about colonial America with this map by Daniel Paterson: *Containment of His Majesty's Forces in N. America*, March 1766. For this warm up, I project the map on the board (or distribute printed copies if my projector isn't very clear 😂) and ask students to Think, Pair, and Share answers to the following questions: • Write down 4-6 things you notice on the map. • This map was created in 1765. What event had just ended in colonial America? Describe it briefly. • Based on what you know about colonial life, do you see any tension points that might arise based on information you can infer from this map?
Stamp Act Box, 1766 National Museum of American History. 1766. Stamp Act repeal box [Artifact]. Smithsonian Institution.https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object/nmah_530070	This decorative, leather document box celebrated the repeal of the Stamp Act, a highly unpopular tax on printed materials in the colonies.	• What clues help you figure out what this object was used for? • Why would people create a special object to celebrate the end of a tax? • What does this artifact tell us about how colonists felt about taxation? • What modern objects do people use to express political opinions today?	I use this object prior to studying the various Acts passed by the British Parliament in the years leading up to the American Revolution. Students first examine the object in groups and work together to infer what it is and how it might have been used. The activity functions as an engaging vocabulary exercise because students must connect the word "Act" to the idea of taxation and ultimately define what a tax is and why governments impose them. At the end of the activity, I ask students to brainstorm modern examples of how people commemorate or publicly respond to political events today. Many students immediately connect the object to things like election signs, political bumper stickers, campaign merchandise, or commemorative memorabilia, which helps them recognize that political expression through objects and material culture is still very much part of everyday life.

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The Bloody Massacre, 1770 Revere, P. (1770). The Bloody Massacre perpetrated in King Street, Boston on March 5th 1770 [Engraving]. Massachusetts Historical Society. https://www.masshist.org/highlights/#id=151	Created shortly after the Boston Massacre, this engraving by Paul Revere helped shape colonial perceptions of the event. Although the image contains several historical inaccuracies and was based on an earlier drawing by Henry Pelham, its emotional portrayal of British soldiers firing on colonists made it one of the most influential pieces of Revolutionary-era propaganda.	• What details stand out in this image? • How are the British soldiers portrayed? • How are the colonists portrayed? • Do you think this image was meant to inform people or persuade them? Why? • How might this image have influenced public opinion?	This primary source is a classic, and so rich for interpretation. There are many guided inquiries of Paul Revere's engraving of the Boston Massacre, which I love to use with my students, including the scaffolded inquiries created by the Digital Inquiry Group at Stanford. This source is also an excellent editorial cartoon mentor text, and could be used with our INFER artifact analysis protocol as well!
Tea Leaves from the Boston Tea Party, 1773 Massachusetts Historical Society. 1773. Tea leaves in glass bottle collected on the shore of Dorchester Neck the morning of 17 December 1773 [Artifact].https://www.masshist.org/highlights/#id=231	"This small glass bottle contains tea leaves gathered on the shore of Dorchester Neck, across the harbor from Boston, the morning after the Boston Tea Party. This is one of five relics of the Boston Tea Party (including tea caddies and a china punch bowl) in the collections of the MHS."	• Why would someone save tea leaves from this event? • How does an ordinary object become a historical artifact? • What story does this artifact help us tell about the past? • What object from your life would you save to help future historians understand today?	Like the Stamp Act Box, this artifact is an excellent resource for helping students think critically about the creation and preservation of historical artifacts. After examining the relic, I ask students to reflect on something that happened to them—or "in their world"—within the last year and design a commemorative relic connected to that event. The event could be something major, like a trip to Disney World, or something much more ordinary, like a birthday party or school event. Students choose one object connected to that experience to "preserve" and then write a short museum-style description explaining the artifact and its significance. Their writing must include important contextual details such as people, places, and dates. The activity helps students recognize that artifacts are not naturally historical; instead, people assign meaning to objects by choosing what to preserve and how to tell stories about the past.

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The Bostonians Paying the Excise-Man (1774) Anonymous. (1774). The Bostonians paying the excise-man, or tarring and feathering [Political cartoon]. Yale University Library. https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/44094	"This British political cartoon responds to colonial protests against the Tea Act of 1773. It portrays Bostonians as angry and unruly, showing both the tarring and feathering of a customs official and the destruction of tea during the Boston Tea Party.	• What is happening in this cartoon? • How does the artist want viewers to feel about the colonists? • What clues reveal the artist's opinion? • Why might British and colonial people have viewed these events differently? • How can cartoons influence what people believe?	This is a really interesting cartoon for students to analyze, especially because it exposes them to an English perspective on growing unrest in the colonies. Students are often surprised by how negatively the colonists are portrayed, which opens the door for important conversations about bias, propaganda, and perspective during the Revolutionary period. For this activity, I ask students to study the cartoon analysis techniques (helpfully described and outlined here by the Colonial Williamsburg Teacher Institute) and then work collaboratively to identify at least five specific artistic choices the cartoonist made that reflect those techniques. Students might analyze symbolism, exaggeration, labeling, facial expressions, or the positioning of figures within the image. Once groups finish their analysis, students use at least two of those observations as evidence in a short written response to the following prompt: "How does this English cartoonist characterize (portray or represent) American colonists in the pre-Revolutionary period?" This activity works especially well because it pushes students beyond simply describing the image and asks them to analyze how visual choices communicate political arguments and shape public opinion.

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Lord Dunmore's Proclamation, 1775 Dunmore, J. M. (1775). Lord Dunmore's Proclamation [Proclamation]. Virginia Gazette. https://www.lva.virginia.gov/collections/educator-resources/dbva/files/original/867ec5b20723a0696ffff1dc44ae0bf4.pdf	Issued in 1775 by Lord Dunmore, Governor of Virginia, this proclamation promised freedom to *only* enslaved men owned by Patriot colonists if they escaped and joined the British military. The proclamation alarmed many white colonists, especially slaveholders, and intensified fears about both British authority and potential slave resistance. For many enslaved people, however, the proclamation represented a possible path toward freedom during the chaos of war.	• Who was this proclamation written for? • Why would some enslaved people see this as an opportunity? • Why might Patriot colonists have feared this proclamation? • Did the idea of liberty mean the same thing to everyone? Why or why not? • Who did this Proclamation offer freedom to and why?	If you're looking to challenge upper elementary students with textual primary source analysis, Lord Dunmore's Proclamation is a great choice. As colonial-era texts go, it's relatively short, which makes it much more approachable for students. The vocabulary is definitely challenging, but not impossible—especially when students are given structured opportunities to work through the language together. I'd approach the document through a scaffolded close-reading activity: • First, students skim the text, highlight unfamiliar words, and divide the proclamation into smaller chunks by marking every few sentences. • Next, I read the document aloud while students use context clues to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words, jotting down synonyms when they can. • Afterward, students look up any remaining vocabulary and revisit the text with a stronger understanding of the language. • Finally, students work in small groups to translate assigned sections into modern language and share their rewrites with the class. The activity helps students realize that even difficult historical texts become much more accessible when they slow down, annotate thoughtfully, and work collaboratively to unpack meaning.

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Liberty to Slaves Frock Virginia Museum of History & Culture. (n.d.). Liberty to Slaves frock [Artifact interpretation]. https://virginiahistory.org/learn/liberty-slaves-frock	The Liberty to Slaves frock has long been associated with Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment, an all-black regiment of these self-emancipated enslaved men. However, more information has come to light and little to no evidence has been found that the frock ever existed. For more information see the article I wrote for the Virginia Museum of History and Culture.	• Who was liberty meant for during the Revolutionary era? • How might enslaved people have interpreted Dunmore's Proclamation differently than Patriot colonists? • And what does the existence of this garment suggest about the relationship between slavery and the Revolution?	If time allows, I'd also share the VMHC article on the Liberty to Slaves frock with my students and ask them to read it for homework. The article provides important context about the garment and helps students connect the promises of liberty during the Revolutionary period to the lived experiences of enslaved people. The next day, we'd use both Lord Dunmore's Proclamation and the frock as the basis for a class discussion. I like pairing these two sources together because students quickly realize that the Revolution was not experienced the same way by everyone, and that ideas like "freedom" and "liberty" were deeply contested from the very beginning.
Songs of the American Revolution Illinois Public Media. (n.d.). Songs of the American Revolution. https://will.illinois.edu/clefnotes/entry/songs-of-the-american-revolution	This collection from Illinois Public Media explores music associated with the American Revolution, including songs like "Yankee Doodle," "Chester," and "The Liberty Song." Revolutionary-era music served as entertainment, political messaging, propaganda, and morale-building during the conflict.	• What message does this song communicate? • Who was the intended audience? • How could music influence people's opinions? • What modern songs communicate political or social messages today?	I love using Revolutionary songs because students immediately recognize that music has always been tied to politics and identity. I'll often play one or two songs for the class and ask students to annotate the lyrics like they would any other primary source. Students identify tone, audience, and message, and then discuss how music could persuade people or build support for the Patriot cause. This is a great way to build text analysis skills, and, usually, just a fun way to start class.