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Primary Sources for Secondary Students
1763-1775

Secondary students will certainly benefit from exposure to any of the primary sources included in the elementary collection. But when curating sources for older learners, I generally assume students already have a foundational understanding of the basic chronology of the American Revolution. That foundation creates opportunities to engage students in more sophisticated source analysis and increasingly complex historical questions about propaganda, political ideology, resistance, loyalty, slavery, emancipation, and the spread of information during the Revolutionary era.

I also love to complicate students' understanding of the buildup to the Revolution by placing multiple sources in conversation with one another. Rather than treating Revolutionary history as a straightforward sequence of events, I encourage students to compare sources for perspective, accuracy, audience, and narrative. Looking at British military instructions alongside Patriot depositions, propaganda cartoons next to newspaper accounts, or competing descriptions of protest and violence helps students recognize that people living through the Revolutionary era often understood the same events in very different ways.

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Source & Citation	Brief Description	Guiding Questions	How I Would Use it with Students
Join or Die, 1754 Franklin, B. (1754, May 9). Join, or Die [Political cartoon]. Pennsylvania Gazette.https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-join-or-die	Published by Benjamin Franklin in 1754, this political cartoon used a segmented snake to encourage colonial unity and the adoption of the Albany Plan. During the Revolutionary era, the image was revived and took on new meaning as a symbol of resistance to British authority.	• How did the meaning of this image change between 1754 and the Revolutionary era? • Why might Franklin have chosen a snake as the central image? • What techniques does the cartoon use to attempt to persuade its audience? • Why might calls for unity have become increasingly important by the 1770s?	I'm sure there are ways to use the "Join, or Die" symbolism with elementary students, but for me, the history of the cartoon and its later connections to the Gadsden Flag are just complicated enough that I tend to bump it into a secondary source set. The symbolism, historical context, and evolving political meanings behind both images require a level of nuance that older students are often more prepared to unpack. I like pairing the "Join, or Die" cartoon with the Gadsden Flag, The Bloody Massacre perpetrated in King Street by Paul Revere, the "Tea, Destroyed by Indians" broadside, and excerpts from Common Sense to help students examine propaganda and the spread of information during the American Revolution. Together, these sources allow students to analyze how imagery, slogans, print culture, and persuasive writing influenced public opinion and encouraged support for the Patriot cause. Typically, I ask students to rotate through the sources and identify specific techniques used to persuade audiences. Students might analyze emotional appeals, symbolism, exaggeration, fear, calls for unity, or depictions of British authority. Once students have examined the sources individually, we discuss the broader question of how information spread during the Revolutionary era and why propaganda was such a powerful tool in shaping colonial resistance.
Gadsden Flag, 1775 Gadsden, C. (1775). Don't Tread on Me [Flag]. https://www.pbs.org/weta/iconic-america/journal/gadsden-flag/	Featuring a rattlesnake and the phrase "Don't Tread on Me," the Gadsden Flag became one of the most recognizable symbols of colonial resistance. Like the "Join, or Die" cartoon, it demonstrates how imagery and slogans helped communicate political ideas during the Revolution.	• What message does the flag communicate about the relationship between Britain and the colonies? • How does symbolism function as a form of political communication? • Why might visual propaganda be more effective than written arguments for some audiences? • How do political symbols evolve over time?	

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Tea, Destroyed by Indians, 1773. Anonymous. (1773). Tea, Destroyed by Indians [Broadside]. Massachusetts Historical Society. https://www.masshist.org/highlights/#id=402	Distributed shortly after the Boston Tea Party, this broadside celebrates colonial resistance and encourages readers to defend their rights. The language is highly emotional and reflects Patriot efforts to shape public opinion.	• What specific language is designed to persuade readers? • How does the broadside frame the Boston Tea Party? • What emotions is the author trying to evoke? • What does this source suggest about the role of propaganda in the Revolutionary movement?	
Source Selection, Guiding Questions, and Classroom Application by Patrick Hussey, lilyPD Education Intern! **Gaspée Affair, 1772** Wanton, J. (1772). *Letters from Rhode Island Governor Wanton to Lieutenant Dudingston.* Rhode Island Department of State. https://www.sos.ri.gov/divisions/civics-and-education/for-educators/themed-collections/gaspee/who-controls-the-colony	The attack on the British Royal Navy's HMS Gaspee is celebrated in Rhode Island as the spark that ignited the American Revolution. A letter written by then Governor of Rhode Island, Joseph Wanton, to Lieutenant William Dudingston, in command of the Gaspée, an English ship. In the letter, Governor Wanton questions the Lieutenant's authority and actions concerning the search and seizure of other vessels for suspicion of smuggling good.	• Describe what happened in the Gaspee Affair. • For whom did Governor Wanton seek to support? Was it the people of Rhode Island or the King? • Why is the Gaspée Affair an important event leading up to American independence? Do you see a connection to other events we have learned about? • What is the defining quality between an act of patriotism and one of treason?	Have students brainstorm—independently or in small groups—why the actions of the Rhode Islanders in the Gaspee Affair might be considered drastic. List their initial thoughts on the board. Ask the class to review the brainstormed points. Give them a moment to identify which themes, frustrations, and interpretations overlap across the groups. Direct them to read either the original or transcribed letter to compare how interpretations of the events differ and align.

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The Virginia Resolves, 1765 Henry, P. (1765). Virginia Resolves. Encyclopedia Virginia. https://encyclopediavirginia.org/primary-documents/virginia-resolves-on-the-stamp-act-1765/	Written by Patrick Henry in response to the Stamp Act, the Virginia Resolves argued that colonists possessed the same rights as English subjects and could not be taxed without representation. The document reveals that many colonists were still seeking reform within the British Empire rather than independence.	• What rights does Henry claim are being violated? • Does this document advocate independence? Why or why not? • How does the Virginia Resolves foreshadow ideas later found in the Declaration of Independence? • What does this source reveal about colonial attitudes in 1765?	I like to describe the Virginia Resolves as a sort of prelude to the United States Declaration of Independence and evidence that even some of the most radical Patriots were still framing their complaints around violations of their "Rights as Englishmen." The document helps students see that, in the mid-1760s, many colonists were demanding what they believed were their traditional rights within the British Empire. In my classroom, we turn the Resolves into a quick creative activity. I ask students to either illustrate one of the resolutions or create a found poem from the text itself. Both options push students to slow down, wrestle with the language, and think carefully about the ideas embedded in the document, while also giving them a more accessible and engaging way to process a dense political text.

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Massachusetts Gazette & Boston Post Boy on the Tea Act, 1773 Massachusetts Gazette and Boston Post-Boy and Advertiser. (1773, August). https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?pid=2&old=1&mode=nav&ft=Coming%20of%20the%20American%20Revolution&item_id=434	This newspaper article discusses reactions to the Tea Act and its economic implications for the colonies. It provides students with an opportunity to examine how contemporary newspapers informed readers about British policies.	• How do Dorr's annotations shape our interpretation of the newspapers? • What advantages and limitations come with using newspapers as historical evidence? • How can historians use this collection to track changing attitudes toward Britain over time? • What does Dorr's commentary reveal about historical interpretation?	I love using this excerpted article alongside the inquiry questions provided by the Massachusetts Historical Society as a way to help students practice writing claims and citing textual evidence in short responses. In my classes, we call this a “Flash DBQ” because students only analyze a single document rather than a full source set. I’ve found that this structure lowers the cognitive load for students while still giving them authentic practice with historical thinking skills. Students have to closely read the source, develop a defensible claim, and support their ideas with direct evidence from the text—all in a much more manageable format than a traditional DBQ. It’s also a great way to build confidence before students tackle larger inquiry tasks later in the year.

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The Annotated Newspapers of Harbottle Dorr, Jr., 1765-1776. Massachusetts Historical Society. 1765-1776. The Annotated Newspapers of Harbottle Dorr, Jr., https://www.masshist.org/dorr/	Harbottle Dorr collected, annotated, and indexed hundreds of Revolutionary-era newspapers. His collection provides a unique opportunity to study both contemporary reporting and one colonist's reactions to unfolding events.	• How do Dorr's annotations shape our interpretation of the newspapers? • What advantages and limitations come with using newspapers as historical evidence? • How can historians use this collection to track changing attitudes toward Britain over time? • What does Dorr's commentary reveal about historical interpretation?	Massachusetts Historical Society's Annotated Newspapers of Harbottle Dorr, Jr. is basically a Revolutionary-era research database. Much like we do with runaway advertisements, I encourage students to treat the collection less like a single "document" and more like a searchable window into everyday life and political tensions in the colonies between 1765–1776. Rather than assigning students one specific article, I usually ask them to investigate a broader inquiry question and use the newspapers to gather evidence across multiple issues. Students might explore questions like: • How did colonists discuss British taxation? • What kinds of protests appeared in newspapers? • What language did colonists use to describe loyalty or resistance? Because Harbottle Dorr annotated and indexed the newspapers himself, students also get the rare opportunity to analyze not just the newspapers, but the reactions of someone living through the Revolution in real time. His notes help students see that history is interpreted by people, even in the moment it is happening.

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A Deposition from Colonial Militiamen from the Battle of Lexington & Concord, 1775 Massachusetts Provincial Congress. (1775). Deposition of Colonial Militiamen. https://www.battlefields.org/learn/primary-sources/deposition-colonial-militiamen-battle-lexington-and-concord	This primary source is a firsthand account from colonial militiamen describing the opening conflict between British soldiers and colonial forces at Lexington and Concord in April 1775. Depositions like this were gathered and circulated by Patriots to document British aggression and shape public opinion throughout the colonies. The account reflects the confusion, fear, and violence of the day while also revealing how colonists framed the conflict politically.	• How do the authors portray British soldiers? • What evidence suggests this source may be biased? • Why were accounts like this collected and distributed? • How should historians evaluate the reliability of eyewitness testimony?	I love using these three sources together because they allow students to triangulate the outbreak of the Revolution through multiple lenses: British military planning, colonial eyewitness testimony, and geographic context. Usually, I begin with General Gage's instructions so students can analyze British fears and objectives before fighting begins. Then, students read the militiamen's deposition to examine how colonists interpreted the events at Lexington and Concord. Finally, we use the interactive map to trace where these events unfolded and discuss why geography mattered so much to both sides.
General Gage's Instructions, 20 February 1775 Gage, T. (1775, February 20). Instructions to British Forces. https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.p	This document contains military instructions issued by British General Thomas Gage, the royal governor of Massachusetts, just months before the outbreak of open warfare. The instructions reveal British concerns about colonial resistance and	• What concerns seem most important to Gage? • How does this document challenge or support Patriot accounts of British intentions? • What does the source reveal about British assumptions regarding the colonies? • To what extent did British actions contribute to the outbreak of war?	

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hp?pid=2&old=1&mode=nav&ft=Coming%20of%20the%20American%20Revolution&item_id=554	demonstrate how seriously imperial officials viewed growing unrest in Massachusetts. Students can see evidence of British attempts to maintain order and authority while also recognizing how military preparation itself escalated tensions between Britain and the colonies.		
Interactive Map of the American Revolution American Battlefield Trust. (n.d.). Interactive Map of the American Revolution. https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/the-american-revolution/interactive-map/#battles-of-lexington-concord	This interactive map allows students to geographically trace important events, battles, troop movements, and political developments during the Revolutionary era. Rather than viewing the Revolution as a disconnected list of events, students can visualize how geography shaped military strategy, communication, trade, and political resistance across the colonies.	• How did geography shape the course of the Revolution? • Why were certain locations strategically important? • What patterns emerge when events are viewed spatially rather than chronologically? • How does mapping change our understanding of the Revolution?	

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Lord Dunmore's Proclamation, 1775 Dunmore, J. M. (1775). Lord Dunmore's Proclamation. https://encyclopediavirginia.org/primary-documents/lord-dunmores-proclamation-1775/	Issued in 1775, Lord Dunmore's Proclamation offered freedom to enslaved men owned by Patriot colonists if they escaped and joined the British military. The document reveals the complex relationship between slavery, liberty, and military strategy during the Revolution.	One of the most interesting comparisons students can make during the Revolutionary period is between Lord Dunmore's Proclamation and Emancipation Proclamation. Lord Dunmore's Proclamation promised freedom to enslaved men owned by Patriot colonists if they escaped and joined the British war effort during the American Revolution. The Emancipation Proclamation, issued nearly a century later by Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War, declared freedom for enslaved people in Confederate states still in rebellion against the Union. Putting these documents side-by-side creates incredible opportunities for historical comparison. Students can analyze: • how freedom was framed in each document • who was included or excluded • the relationship between military strategy and emancipation • how enslaved people navigated these moments to pursue their own freedom In my classroom, this comparison almost always leads students to realize that emancipation in American history was often deeply connected to war, politics, and power—not simply morality alone. It also helps students see continuity and change across different eras of American history while centering the agency of enslaved people themselves.	
The Emancipation Proclamation, 1863 Lincoln, A. (1863). Emancipation Proclamation. https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/emancipation-proclamation/transcript.html	Issued by Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation declared freedom for enslaved people in states still in rebellion against the Union. Comparing it with Dunmore's Proclamation allows students to examine continuity and change in the relationship between war and emancipation.		