

Abigail's War:

The American Revolution through the Eyes of Abigail Adams

*A Primary Source-Based Activity Book
for Elementary-School-Age Children*

Rationale / Teacher's Guide

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Rationale

The purpose of the four-week Adams Teacher Fellowship at the Massachusetts Historical Society is to explore the *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive* and related materials at the MHS to create lesson plans that introduce students to the use of primary sources.

I decided to focus my lesson plans on Abigail Adams and her experiences during the Revolutionary War. Abigail was an extraordinary individual whose letters offer unique insight into the life of a Massachusetts woman during the development of our country. Each year I spend a great deal of time helping my students learn about the American Revolution, and I have repeatedly found myself struggling with two areas: first, providing substantial, detailed information about the roles of women during these years; and second, finding ways for students to relate the world of the 1770s with their own twenty-first-century lives. Exposing students to Abigail's first-hand accounts of both the ordinary and extraordinary events of the war years appeared to be an ideal solution to both dilemmas.

I chose to use an "activity book" format for my lesson plans so that each student would have all the necessary worksheets and documents with them at all times. I also decided that I would not bring my students to the website itself but would instead provide them with typed transcriptions of primary sources as well as overheads and color reproductions of several key documents. This form of presentation is more appropriate for most grade 5 students.

Lesson one is an introduction to primary sources: students will read excerpts from selected documents and discuss elements of style and language as well as the validity and value of these documents as historical resources. An integral aspect of all four lesson plans is oral presentation of the primary sources. I believe that it is important that these documents be read aloud so that students may gain a better sense of the flow and tone of the written language. Lesson two, an examination of the events of the Battle of Bunker Hill, focuses on eye-witness accounts of Abigail Adams and William Prescott. Students will have an opportunity to stand beside Abigail as she watches the battle and create their own journal entry account of that day.

Lesson three introduces themes of economy, particularly the inflation and devaluation of currency during the war years. Students will learn about the currency used in 1770s Massachusetts as well as some of the effects of war on the colonial economy. Using Abigail Adams's own accounts, students will be able to compare the prices of goods during two months of the war. Students will also participate in a "shopping trip," wherein they will need to "purchase" their own sets of necessary goods, first at prices from April 1777 and then again from September 1777. Students will brainstorm and discuss ways in which colonial families may have adjusted their budgets and lifestyles in order to deal with the wartime economic "crunch."

The fourth lesson deals with Abigail's daily life. How did an average colonial-era woman, who had children and a farm to care for and whose husband was away on war business, live her life each day? Students will learn about daily tasks and read excerpts from Abigail's letters that describe some of her activities.

Primary source materials provide students with valuable insight and perspective about what it was like "to really be there" during both the well-known and the more mundane moments of the past. Based upon documents from the Adams digital archive, the following lessons and activities provide grade 5 students with exposure to these documents as well as an opportunity to explore and analyze their value as historical tools. Students will also be able to use these documents as a way to relate past events to their own lives and realities as they compose creative writing pieces that place themselves in the past. These documents provide students with an invaluable window through which they can view the past, and are an integral aspect of any Social Studies curriculum that works to bring history alive for children of all ages.

Teacher's Guide for

Abigail's War: The American Revolution through the Eyes of Abigail Adams

Lesson 1 Introduction to Primary Sources

Objectives:

By the end of this lesson, students will:

1. Clearly define, either verbally or in writing, both primary and secondary sources. They will be able to identify the different perspectives of each source (ie, "I" statements and personal pronouns vs. 3rd person narrative.) Students will recognize that anything produced during a certain historical era—such as maps, illustrations, advertisements, etc.—are Primary Sources.
2. Create an individual primary source account of a shared class experience, such as physical education or science class.
3. Analyze the various primary-source accounts of their classmates, focusing on similarities, differences, and "I" statements.
4. Compare a primary-source account of The Battle of Bunker Hill with an account of the battle taken from a social studies text.
5. Discuss and explain in brief written form why both types of sources are valuable yet also have limitations in conveying historical information (i.e., secondary sources give "just the facts" while primary sources reveal human response, what it was like to "be there").

Materials:

1. Social studies texts or other historical texts containing passages about the Battle of Bunker Hill.
2. Activity book: "What is a Primary Source?" and "Battle of Bunker Hill" sections.
3. Overhead transparencies of activity book pages.

Procedure:

PART I. *This activity is brief and should be done in a shorter class period or at the end of a class.*

1. Explain to students that the class will be spending some time learning about primary-source documents. Ask if anyone can explain what a primary-source document is. Along with students, read a description of an event in a social studies text; what makes this a secondary source? Read together the sample primary-source documents in activity book (be sure to explain any unfamiliar

vocabulary and language and what an excerpt is). What makes these primary sources? What about maps, paintings, etc.? Write definitions together on the sheets provided. Mention personal pronouns, etc.

2. Tell students that both primary and secondary sources have “pros” and “cons” and that in order to be “smart readers” we need to be aware of these qualities. To ground their understanding, ask students to choose a shared experience—for example, another class, the library, etc (not lunch or recess because they children pursue different activities)—and to create their own primary-source accounts of it. The experience must be a shared one because students will be comparing and contrasting their work during the next class. The account should be at least eight sentences long.

PART II

1. Collect students’ narratives of their shared experience. Choose a few good examples, especially those different in content and perspective. Make copies as well as overheads for next class.
2. The next class period, read the narratives together with the students. Ask them to identify personal pronouns and value statements and to point out differences and similarities among “facts” and opinion. Record these differences on the blackboard.
3. Have students read each of two brief textbook accounts of the Battle of Bunker Hill. Ask them to search for personal pronouns or opinions and to compare the facts in each.
4. Together with the students, read the excerpt from William Prescott’s letter describing the Battle of Bunker Hill in the activity book’s “Bunker Hill” section. Compare the content of the letter with the content of the textbook passages about the event.
5. To reinforce learning, ask students verbally to describe the differences between primary sources and secondary sources. Stress that even though the sources are different in style, content, and perspective, BOTH have value and limitations for historical understanding. Ask students to brainstorm pros and cons of primary and secondary sources. (They can do so individually, as Think-Pair-Share activity, in a small group, or as a whole class.) Share ideas and have students record findings on the activity book sheets provided.
6. Discuss with students the value of having both types of sources and the importance of being a critical reader. Because they will be working closely with primary-source documents, it is important that they don’t read them as strictly factual but still appreciate how they enhance historical understanding. Explain that historians write history by comparing a variety of primary

sources and making “best guesses” about what really happened. That is why secondary-source accounts can differ.

Assessment:

1. Observe during initial discussions that students understand and can verbalize the difference between primary and secondary sources.
2. Students must create and pass in their own narrative of a shared class experience. The narrative must be at least eight sentences long, follow an assigned format, and demonstrate sufficient detail and effort.
3. Observe students’ participation during discussion and analysis of their own “primary-source” documents.
4. Observe students’ participation in brainstorming the pros and cons of primary and secondary sources. Students must record responses on the designated worksheet.

Lesson 2
Battle of Bunker Hill

Objectives:

By the end of this lesson, students will:

1. Gain a basic understanding of the events that took place on Breed’s Hill on June 17, 1775.
2. Read and analyze, through discussion and writing, the August 25, 1775 letter from William Prescott to John Adams.
3. Read and analyze, through discussion and writing, the June 18, 1775 letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams.
4. Create a journal entry written from the perspective of a Massachusetts citizen standing with Abigail Adams on Penn’s Hill in 1775 and watching the Battle of Bunker Hill.

Materials:

1. Activity book: “Bunker Hill” section.
2. Overhead transparencies of “Bunker Hill” pages.
3. Any supplementary texts about the Battle of Bunker Hill desired.
4. A graphic organizer of your choice for the “Put Yourself in Abigail’s Shoes” activity.

Procedure:

The lessons will probably span several class periods. Question-and-answer pages can be done in class or as homework.

1. Explain to students that they will be learning more about the Battle of Bunker Hill and experiencing what it was like to have been in, or to have watched, the battle as it happened. Ask if students have any prior knowledge of the event. Read the information page about the Battle of Bunker Hill with them and show them maps of the area.
2. Tell students that first they will be reading a letter by William Prescott, written about two months after the battle. Explain that Prescott was leading patriot troops and is considered a hero of the battle. Mention that because the letter was written weeks after the battle, and Prescott's memory of and attitudes about it may have altered over time.
3. As you display Prescott's letter with an overhead projector, ask the students to recall the maps you have shown them and to picture in their minds the progress of the events Prescott describes. Read the letter out loud. Stop to discuss any unfamiliar vocabulary, phrasing, spelling, etc. Once you have finished reading the letter, ask students to comment on it or ask questions about it.
4. After discussing the letter, ask students—alone or with partners, in class or for homework—to answer comprehension questions and short-answer questions about it. When students have completed the assignment, discuss their responses.
5. Students will next read a letter written by Abigail Adams one day after the Battle of Bunker Hill. Explain how Abigail and her son, along with many of their neighbors, watched from afar as the battle unfolded. Ask students how they think Abigail (and son John Quincy) might have been feeling. How would they feel? What concerns would they have? Why do they think Abigail wanted to watch the fighting?
6. Before you read the letter to the students, instruct them to listen to the tone of the letter, and the words Abigail uses to describe both people and events. With the letter displayed from an overhead projector, read it out loud. Stop to discuss any unfamiliar vocabulary, phrasing, spelling, etc. Once you have finished reading the letter, ask students to comment on it or ask questions about it. Initiate a discussion about the tone of the letter and ask students to identify and comment on some of the adjectives and descriptive phrases in it.
7. After discussing the letter, ask students—alone or with partners, in class or for homework—to answer comprehension and short-answer questions about it. When students have completed the assignment, discuss their responses.

8. Explain to students that now that they have read and discussed two primary-source accounts of the Battle of Bunker Hill, they will now have the chance to “put themselves in Abigail’s shoes” and create their own account of watching the battle. Explain that at such a great distance, Abigail and John Quincy would not have been able to see individuals begin shot, but they would have seen smoke rising and ships in the harbor. Read and discuss directions for journal-entry writing, and have students share their work.

Assessment:

1. Observe whether or not students participate in any of the whole-group discussion.
2. Evaluate the accuracy of responses to comprehension questions.
3. Evaluate responses to short-answer questions for thoughtfulness, creativity, accuracy, etc.
4. Evaluate journal responses for such qualities as following directions, historical accuracy, grammar/spelling, creativity, and understanding of the event.

Lesson 3
Abigail’s Economy

Objectives:

By the end of this lesson, students will:

1. Have an understanding of currency denominations used in eighteenth-century Massachusetts and be able to add and subtract using pounds, shillings, and pence.
2. Discuss and explain briefly how inflation and the devaluation of currency affected the “average citizen” during the Revolutionary War.
3. Read and discuss various primary sources, including letters from Abigail Adams and a Boston Committee of Correspondence circular letter that illustrate how prices of goods were affected and what attempts were made to stem inflation during the war era.
4. Complete a “shopping” activity in which, restricted to a set amount of “money,” they will purchase a range of goods in April 1777 and again in September 1777.
5. Compare the quantity and type of goods they were able to purchase in April and September 1777.
6. Discuss and write about how inflation and devaluation affected their ability to purchase goods and how these circumstances may have shaped the lives of Abigail Adams and other Massachusetts residents on the Revolutionary War homefront.

7. Propose possible practical solutions to living with the economic “crunch” of the 1770s.

Materials:

1. Activity book: “Shopping in 1777” section.
2. Overhead transparencies of activity book pages.

Procedure: *The lessons may be confined to one class period or span several.*

1. Explain to students that they will be learning about some of the economic hardships faced by Abigail Adams during the war years. Ask students if they have ever heard the term “inflation.” Explain the general theory behind inflation and the devaluation of currency. With the students, read the information pages about inflation during the Revolutionary War and answer any questions they may have.
2. Explain to students that during wartime, inflation can occur relatively quickly. With the students, read excerpts from Abigail Adams’s 1776 & April and September 1777 letters. Using overhead charts, compare the change in prices for goods.
3. Show students the “Extracts from the Proceedings of the Convention at Concord and the Town of Boston,” as well as its transcribed version. Discuss evidence that prices of certain goods continued to rise, and so local governments had to find ways to address the situation. Show students the Committee of Correspondence circular letter printed prior to the Convention, that pleads for economic relief.

Boston, June 21, 1779: Gentlemen, By the inclosed votes and proceedings...
<http://www.masshist.org/online/db.cfm?queryID=221>

Extracts from proceedings of the convention at Concord, and of the town of Boston.
<http://www.masshist.org/online/db.cfm?queryID=222>

4. Together with the students read “The Currency of Colonial Massachusetts” in the activity book. Work through its math problems and add more if students need more practice.
5. Tell students that they will again be putting themselves in “Abigail’s shoes” by completing a “Historical Shopping Trip.” They will be working with a partner to purchase goods their colonial families will need. They will be making two shopping trips, one in April 1777 and the other in September 1777, each time with the same amount of money. Go over directions for the April 1777 shopping trip: student pairs will purchase both “necessary” and

“luxury” goods. After they have completed the exercise, ask each pair to report how much money they had left over after purchasing “necessary” items and what “luxury” items they then purchased with that surplus.

6. Tell students that several months have passed, and it is time to go shopping again. Since incomes tended not to increase during wartime, students will have no more money to spend than they had a few months earlier. Go over directions, and again instruct students to work with a partner to purchase their goods. Once they have completed the exercise, have student pairs report about their purchases and account information.
7. Ask students to compare the quantities and types of goods they purchased in April and September 1777. Students should find that they were able to purchase smaller quantities of “necessary” items, and fewer “luxury” goods. Initiate a discussion about how inflation may have affected the lives of people like Abigail Adams during the war. Ask students-alone, with a partner, or as a class- to brainstorm possible solutions to economic difficulties (e.g., grow more food, share with neighbors, sew clothes, don’t drink coffee, give up luxury items, etc.). Discuss the feasibility of proposed solutions, and whether or not they are historically accurate. Have students choose one solution to illustrate as an advertisement in their activity book.

Assessment:

1. Observe whether or not students participate in class discussions.
2. Observe whether or not students work cooperatively with their partner during the shopping activity.
3. Observe whether or not students correctly “purchase” necessary goods and whether or not students’ mathematical calculations are accurate.
4. Observe during discussion whether or not students recognize that inflation decreases the number of goods one can purchase with a fixed amount of money.
5. Observe whether or not students participate during brainstorming activities and whether or not they create feasible “solutions” to the war’s economic difficulties.
6. Observe whether or not students complete the illustration activity based upon previously established criteria.

Lesson 4
Everyday Abigail

Objectives:

By the end of this lesson, students will:

1. Read and discuss the many daily tasks completed by women in 1770s Massachusetts.
2. Read and discuss excerpts from Abigail Adams's correspondence that describe some of these daily tasks.
3. Compare their own families' daily tasks with those of families like the Adamses.

Procedure:

1. Tell students that they will be learning about the daily lives of Abigail Adams and other New England women who lived during the era of the American Revolution. Ask them to think for a moment about the chores that they and their family members complete in a week's time. Remind them not just to think about their own chores, such as cleaning their rooms or emptying the dishwasher, but also about tasks that their parents and siblings perform, such as grocery shopping, cooking, house repairs, etc. Ask students to record those tasks on the "My Family's Chores" page in activity book. When they have completed the exercise, ask students to share their ideas and create a master list on the blackboard. Tell students they can add to their own list as the discussion proceeds.
2. Have students turn to the page in their activity book entitled "Abigail's Chores." Read the list with the students and ask them to compare their own list with Abigail's. Ask them to point out chores that appear on both lists as well as those that appear on one only. For the chores that appear on both lists, ask students to think about how they may have been performed differently over two hundred years ago (e.g., we drive our cars to the grocery store, where we buy all or most of our food, while Abigail walked or rode to many locations to buy food and also grew some herself.)
3. Have the class read the excerpts from Abigail's letters that describe her activities. Remind students that Abigail had to perform not only her own tasks but also those of her husband, John, while he was away. Discuss how the added stresses of wartime multiplied her activities. Explain how the threat of serious illness loomed over her family much more than it does today. Answer any questions that arise from reading the excerpts.
4. Tell students that they will now complete a more focused comparison of a chore done by both Abigail's family and their own (such as grocery shopping, cleaning, etc.) Using the Venn Diagram page in their activity book, they need to choose a task and compare and contrast the ways in which Abigail's family would have performed it and how their family does so. Remind students to use detail, and to be as specific as possible. For example, if the student chooses "washing clothes", he or she should think about how the clothes were washed,

how they were dried, how long the process would have taken, etc. Students may work on their own or with a partner.

Assessment:

1. Observe whether or not students participate in class discussions.
2. Students will complete list of family chores.
3. Students will complete Venn Diagram, using sufficient details as they compare and contrast chores.