

Who Shot First?

Theme

Primary resources are the keys to unlocking the past. How do we know what know? Details of the fighting at North Bridge are still subject to interpretation. First-hand accounts provide us with many answers and many questions, forcing us to ask, "Who do we believe?"

Program Description

How do we know what we know? History is not just a parade of facts, names and dates laid out in a perfect and unchangeable order. History, or more correctly, how we perceive it, is constantly changing! Much of what we "know" about events of the past is based upon how different historians interpret these events through the study of primary resources. Primary resources, first-hand accounts, are the tools that historians use to unlock the secrets of the past. During this one hour program, students will tour the North Bridge battlefield with a National Park Ranger who will lead a discussion of what happened there on April 19, 1775, day one of the American Revolution, using the landscape and other tangible resources to set the stage.

When the group reaches the North Bridge, four students will be selected to play the role of colonists who took part in the battle, and read an excerpt of that character's account. The ranger will point out important details of each account. Crossing the Bridge, the same will be done with four British accounts. On what points do these sources agree, and where do they differ? Why might this be?

At the conclusion, the ranger will lead the students in a brief discussion, and ask them, based on the primary resource evidence they have heard, which side they believe fired the first shots at the North Bridge. Students will be required to explain the reason for their vote and why it is important to know this information. What effect did it have on the course of events?

The program ends with a brief musket firing demonstration to add yet another layer of reality to their experience and inspire their imaginations.

Goal

To provide students an opportunity to answer the question, "How do we know what we know?" about historic events, in particular the fight at the North Bridge

Behavioral Objectives: *Students should be able to*

- Explain how a cause and effect relationship is different from a sequence or correlation of events.
- Distinguish between long-term and short-term cause and effect relationships.
- Distinguish intended from unintended consequences.
- Distinguish historical fact from opinion.
- Think critically about the sources of historical knowledge

- Create a narrative of the North Bridge fight based on their interpretation of the first-hand accounts.
- Draw conclusions about the North Bridge fight and back up those conclusions with first-hand accounts.

Part I – Introduction (2 minutes)

Welcome to Minute Man NHP. My name is Park Ranger Jim Hollister. During the next 30 minutes, we will walk down to the North Bridge and discuss details of the fighting that occurred there on April 19, 1775 – the first day of the American Revolution.

During the program we will be covering a lot of information, but I want you to think about **how** we know what we know. History, or more correctly, how we perceive it, is constantly changing! Much of what we call historical fact is based upon how different historians interpret primary resources. Primary resources, first-hand accounts, are the tools that historians use to unlock the secrets of the past. We will be using excerpts from some of these sources, along with the landscape itself, as evidence to reconstruct how the fighting occurred at North Bridge. Because this is such a large topic, and we only have 30 minutes, we will narrow our investigation to answer one very important question in particular. Who shot first?

Part II – Provide some background information (5 minutes)

- Why is Massachusetts in rebellion? – To retain their Charter rights and to govern themselves.
- Why are the British regulars in Concord? – To seek out and destroy a large cache of weapons, ammunition and military supplies known to be stockpiled here.

Part III – Begin the walk to the Bridge along the path (2 minutes)

- Stop when you are at a location where you can see the Bridge and discuss troop movements leading up to the North Bridge Fight.
- Continue on until you reach the place where the road used to fork and discuss the mission to Barrett's Farm.
- Also while at this location, set the stage for the colonists to advance from the muster field (because they believe the town is being burned) toward the outnumbered British force at the Bridge.

Part IV – The Provincial side

- The British have pulled back to the opposite shore and the fighting is about to begin.
- Ask for four volunteers who would like to read a short excerpt of a first-hand account.

1. Col. James Barrett

"I, James Barrett of Concord, Colonel of a Regiment of Militia in the County of Middlesex, do testify and say, that on Wednesday morning last about daybreak I was

informed of the approach of a number of the Regular Troops to the Town of Concord, where were some magazines belonging to this Province. When there was assembled some of the Militia of this and the neighboring Towns, I ordered them to march to the North Bridge (so called) which they [the British] had passed and were taking up. I ordered said militia to march to said bridge and pass the same, but not to fire on the King's troops unless they were first fired upon. We advanced near said Bridge, when the said troops fired upon our militia and killed two men dead on the spot, and wounded several others, which was the first firing of guns in the town of Concord. My detachment then returned the fire, which killed and wounded several of the king's soldiers"

- He issues orders not to fire first
- Claims the British give the first fire

2. Reverend William Emerson

... In the mean time, the guard set by the enemy to Secure the passage at the North Bridge, were alarmed by the approach of our People, who had retreated as mentioned before, and were now advancing with Special Orders not to fire upon ye troops unless fired upon. These orders were so punctually observed that we received the fire of the Enemy in 3 several and separate discharges of their pieces, before it was returned...The firing then soon became general for several minutes, in which Skirmish two were killed in each side, and several of the enemy wounded.

- Mentions the orders not to fire first
- Claims the British fire first – 3 times

3. Thaddeus Blood

About 9 o'clock we saw a smoke rise at the court house. It was proposed that we march into town...Col. James Barrett...rode along the line & having consulted with the officers...shouted not to fire first, they began their march.... The company of British formed first on the causeway...they then retreated over the bridge and in retreating took up 3 plank[s], and formed part in the road and part on each side, our men the same time marching in very good order, along the road in double file...At that time an officer rode up and a gun was fired. I saw where the Ball threw up the water about the middle of the river, then a second and third shot, and the cry "FIRE" was made from front to rear. The fire was almost simultaneous with the cry, & I think it was not more than 2 minutes if so much till the British run & the fire ceased.

- Mentions orders not to fire first
- Mentions the causeway (this will come up again with Amos Barrett)
- British fire first, 3 times
- A shot goes into the water

4. Amos Barrett

...when we was on the hill by the bridge their was about 80 or 90 British came to the bridge and their made a halt, after a while they begun to tair the plank of the bridge. Mager Buttrick said if we wair all of his mind he wood drive them sway from the bridge, they should not tair that up. We all said we wood go. We then want [weren't] loaded we wair all ordered to load—and had strict orders not to fire until they fired first, then to fire as fast as we could...Captain Davis had got, I believe, within rods of the British when

they fired 3 guns one right after the other. I see the balls strike in the river on the right of me – as soon as they fired them they fired on us – their balls whistled well. We then was all ordered to fire and not kill our own men. It is straining that their warnt no more kild but they fird to high. Captain Davis was killed and Mr. Hosmer and a number wounded. We soon drove them from the bridge. When I got over, there was 2 lay dead and another almost dead. We did not foller them. There was 8 or 10 that was wounded and running and hobbling about looking back to see if we was after them.

- Orders
- British fire first, 3 times
- Balls strike in the river
- All ordered to fire and “not kill our own men.” (Bring up the causeway mentioned by Blood. NPS archeology has determined that the Bridge was approached from the west by a narrow causeway of fieldstone and stand. Town records also indicate a stone wall and rail fence on the colonial left, thus confining them to a narrow lane forcing them to shoot over each other’s heads. Point out the water on either side of them.)

Follow these sources up by mentioning that Col. Barrett’s and Rev. Emerson’s accounts were contemporary, while Blood’s and Amos Barrett’s were written decades later; and yet they still agree on these key details.

Part V – The British Side

- Cross the Bridge to where the British stood.
- Remind people that these soldiers were likely nervous (outnumbered 4 -1) and sleep deprived.
- Describe the walls and road as they were then, much more narrow.

1. Ensign Jeremy Lister, light infantry co’y 10th Regiment of Foot (22 years old, been in the army for 5 years. He was commissioned as a Christmas present from his father when he was 17. This is his first combat.)

the rebels began their march from the hill we before had retired, with as much order as the best disciplined troops. I proposed destroying the bridge. But before we got one plank off, they got so near as to begin their fire which was a very heavy one. Our companies were drawn up in order to fire street firing, yet the weight of their firing was such that we was obliged to give way and run with the greatest precipitance.

- Destroy the Bridge? Why are they guarding it in the first place? Does this indicate desperation?
- Colonists fire first
- Explain street firing

2. Lt. John Barker, light infantry co’y 4th Regiment of Foot

...the Rebels marched into the road and were coming down upon us when Capt. Lawrie made his men retire to this side of the Bridge, which by the by he ought to have done at the first and then he would have had time to make a good disposition, but at this time he had not, for the rebels were got so near him that his people were obliged to form the best

way they could as soon as they were over the Bridge, the three companies got one behind the other so that only the front one could fire; the Rebels when they got near the Bridge halted and fronted filling the road from top to bottom. The fire soon began from a dropping shot on our side, when they and the front company fired almost at the same instant, there being nobody to support the front Company. The others not firing the whole were forced to quit the bridge and return to Concord... Four officer[s] of eight who were at the Bridge were wounded, three men killed; one sergeant and several men wounded...

- He thinks Capt. Laurie waited too long to retreat across the Bridge.
- Complains that only the front one could fire. Could this indicate that he is not familiar with street firing? If he was, the column formation would have made more sense to him.
- The fire began "from a dropping shot on our side." Does this mean they received a dropping shot, or delivered a dropping shot? If the latter, that might match up with colonial accounts of shots landing in the river. ???

3. Lt. William Sutherland, Btnn co'y 38th Regiment of Foot (serving as a volunteer, as his unit was not deployed on this mission)

On their beginning to march down on us...in a very military manner, ...all the Officers mentioned to Capt. Laurie that it would be better to go over the Bridge, raise a few planks, which we did I being the last that came over myself & raised the first plank. Capt. Laurie desired the men to form a line to the right and left of the bridge and the soldiers to keep up their fire. I jumped over the hedge into a meadow just opposite the enemy as they were advancing and begged the [men] would follow me...which only three or four did at which the enemy seeing them all together at the end of the Bridge fired a few shots which our men returned and I with my 3 men returned, in loading & in the act of firing again I received a shot a little above my right breast which turned me half round when I heard Capt. Laurie commanding and exhorting his men to be steady & to return the enemy's fire, I called to Capt. Laurie that I was wounded and came off the best way I could under a fire from the enemy...

- Says the colonists marched in a very military manner!
- Advises destroying the Bridge, thus agreeing with Lister
- Why didn't more soldiers follow him to the field? Perhaps it was because they didn't know him and were too focused on the enemy, numerous and very close!
- Seems like the shooting has already started while the soldiers are forming up. Who started it?

4. Capt. Walter Laurie, light infantry co'y 43rd Regiment of Foot

By this time the body of the Country people, arrived on the heights, which the company of the 4th reg't had occupied, and there drew up with shouldered arms to the number of about 1500—they halted for a considerable time looking at us, and then moved down upon me in a seeming regular manner. After consulting with Lt. Southerland of the 38th Reg't, I determined to repossess the Bridge with the three companies, retreating by divisions, to check their progress, which we accordingly did, lining the opposite side of the river with one company, to flank the other two in case of attack. By this time they were close upon us, and I imagine myself, that a man of my own company (afterwards killed) did first fire his piece, though Mr. Sutherland has since assured me that the

Country people first fired. A general popping then ensued, the company of the 4th Reg't gave afire, as did a few of my own from the flanks, after which the whole went to the right about, in spite of all that could be done to prevent them.

- Like Sutherland, he mentions that the colonists marched in a regular manner.
- It sounds like he has control of the situation until...
- "I imagine myself that a man of my own company did first fire his piece."
- From this, he seems a bit confused, and does not have full control.

Part VI – Conclusions

After all the evidence has been presented, ask the group who they think fired first. Tell them there is no right or wrong answer, they just have to explain why they think so and give the source. In truth, we do not know for sure who did fire first at North Bridge. However, the colonists are much more consistent. What sense are we getting from the British sources? Confusion. Based on this, the evidence seems to point to the British firing first. Why is this important?

Pre-visit activity ~ Who's telling the truth?

Reading primary source documents is one of the most enjoyable, rewarding, and challenging ways to learn about historic events. It is **enjoyable** because you are reading the words of a *real person who was really there!* It is **rewarding** because the conclusions you draw are YOUR OWN, not the interpretation of another historian. It is **challenging** because people back then, just as people today, had their own opinions, perspectives and motives for writing down what they saw, felt, and experienced. Like a detective, you must be able to sort through all of this to arrive at historical truth. Even then, the facts remain open to debate.

Read these two accounts of the Battle of Lexington.

Both men were there.

One account was written in 1775

One account was written in 1825

Does it sound like they are describing the same event?

Where do they agree?

Where do they disagree?

"...there suddenly appeared a number of the King's Troops, about sixty or seventy yards from us, huzzaing and on a quick pace towards us, ... upon which said company dispersing, the foremost of the three officers ordered their men, saying 'Fire, by God, fire; at which moment we received a very heavy and close fire from them; at which instant, being wounded, I fell, and several of our men were shot dead by one volley. Capt. Parker's men, I believe, had not then fired a gun."

John Robbins, April 25, 1775

“...finding our company kept their ground. Col. Smith ordered his troops to fire...I thought, and so stated to Ebenezer Munroe, Jun. who stood next to me on the left, that they had fired nothing but powder; but, on the second firing, Munroe said, they had fired something more than powder, for he had received a wound in his arm: and now, said he... ‘I’ll give them the guts of my gun.’ We both took aim at the main body of the British troops...and discharged our pieces.”

John Munroe, December 28, 1824

Post visit activity

Have each student write a letter or journal entry of their own, to a friend or relative far away, describing, from their own perspective (British, Colonial, Loyalist, man or woman), what happened on April 19, 1775.

Divide the class into groups. Give each group a period document describing April 19th. have the group read it and report to the class. Teacher can summarize.