

Unit 1

“The Decisive day is Come....” The Battle of Bunker Hill

Introduction:

This lesson examines how Abigail Adams depicted life in Boston area during the Siege of Boston and how she described the Battle of Bunker Hill. It is designed to be taught during three class periods.

Skills Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- 1) read and interpret primary source documents in historical context;
- 2) identify the characteristics of 18th century letter writing;
- 3) identify and interpret various forms of 18th century media;
- 4) read and analyze a secondary source historical essay by a historian;
- 5) create their own “modern” version of an 18th century form of media.

Content Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- 1) describe and explain why British regulars chose to attack Breed’s Hill;
- 2) explain why the colonists chose to defend and then retreat from Bunker Hill;
- 3) analyze why geography played a key role in the Battle of Bunker Hill;
- 4) interpret and explain why the Battle of Bunker Hill was critical to both the British and the colonists;
- 5) compare the residual impact of the Battle of Bunker Hill to recent events in American history.

Documents:

Bernard Bailyn's essay "The Battle of Bunker Hill"

Map "A Sketch of the Action Between the British Forces and the American Provincials"

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 18-20 June 1775

Two engravings: Bernard Roman's *Exact View of The Late Battle at Charlestown* and *View of the Attack on Bunker's Hill*

Broadside "By an Express Arrived at Philadelphia . . ."

Letter from John Quincy Adams to Joseph Sturge, March 1846

Learning Activities:

Day One:

1) Set the stage with a discussion of what students know, think they know, and would like to know about the Battle of Bunker Hill and the Siege of Boston. Record answers, thoughts and questions on an overhead or black board.

2) Read Bernard Bailyn's essay "The Battle of Bunker Hill" (<http://www.masshist.org/bh/essay.html>) and pair students together to answer the comprehension questions (Handout 1).

3) **Home work:** Have students study the map "Sketch of the Action Between the British Forces and the American Provincials" (<http://www.masshist.org/bh/sketch.html>) and answer the questions about it (Handout 2).

Day Two:

1) Review the map "A Sketch of the Action Between the British Forces and the American Provincials" and connect Bernard Bailyn's essay with the information from the map.

2) Introduce students to Abigail and John Adams and their correspondence during the American Revolution. Point out the characteristics of 18th century letter writing, including syntax, grammar, and references to literature and classical history.

3) Connect the art of lettering writing to today's world. Ask students, "When you are writing a note or email to your friends about a big event in your lives or the world, what are the important things that need to be in the letter? Which is more important - the content of the letter, or how the content is delivered to the reader?"

4) Read the letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, June 18-20, 1775 (<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17750618aa>) aloud in class. Have students answer the questions about the letter in a discussion, individually, in pairs, or for homework (Handout 3).

Day Three:

1) Introduce students to two sources of visual history: *An Exact View of the Late Battle of Bunker Hill* (<http://www.masshist.org/bh/exactview.html>)and *View of the Attack on Bunker's Hill* (<http://www.masshist.org/bh/view.html>). Discuss why historians have typically opted for written documents as their primary sources of information.

2) Have students examine the two “views” for several minutes. Ask them to compare and contrast the views and answer the questions about them (Handout 4).

3) Broadside: Explain to students that broadsides were one sided sheets of paper that described news, announcements, and major events. They were an easy way to communicate and a major source of “news” before the telegraph, telephone, radio, and television.

4) Examine the broadside “By an Express Arrived at Philadelphia 18th of June . . .” (<http://www.masshist.org/bh/broadside.html>) and answer the questions about it (Handout 5).

5) Homework: have students create their own broadside of a news event that had a great impact upon their lives (Handout 6).

Optional Activity:

John Quincy Adams’s Memory of the Battle of Bunker Hill

1) Read out loud the letter John Quincy Adams wrote to Joseph Sturge in 1846 (<http://www.masshist.org/bh/jqa.html>).

2) Ask students what they know about John Quincy Adams.

3) Have students complete the questions about John Quincy Adams and his memories of the Battle of Bunker Hill (Handout 7).

Handout 1

“The Battle of Bunker Hill” by Bernard Bailyn

"The story of Bunker Hill battle," Allen French wrote, "is a tale of great blunders heroically redeemed." The first blunder was the decision of the Massachusetts Committee of Safety to fortify Charlestown heights and attempt to hold it against the British, cooped up in Boston after their withdrawal from Lexington and Concord. The ultimate aim was, in the abstract at least, sensible enough: to tighten the encirclement of Boston by commanding the heights both north and south of the town—Dorchester as well as Charlestown—and to deny those commanding hills to the British. But in fact the Americans did not have guns capable of reaching Boston effectively from Bunker Hill. And in addition, forces installed there were almost certain to be cut off since the British warships controlled Boston harbor and its confluence with the Charles River, and could easily keep the slim neck that joined Charlestown to the mainland under heavy fire. Nor, once committed, did the American commanders choose their ground wisely. The high point of the mile-long Charlestown peninsula was Bunker Hill—it rose 110 feet, and adjoined the only route of retreat, the roadway back to Cambridge. But the spot chosen for fortification was not Bunker Hill but Breed's Hill, only 75 feet high and 600 yards farther from the neck, controllable from the higher ground at its rear and isolated from the sole route of retreat. And even in the best positions the ill-equipped, altogether untrained troops of the New England army could hardly be expected to hold out against sustained attacks by British regulars led by no less than four general officers experienced in warfare on two continents.

That for two and a half hours of intense battle, greatly outnumbered, they did just that—held out until, their powder gone and forced to fight with gun butts and rocks, they were bayoneted out of the stifling, dust-choked redoubt they had thrown up on Breed's Hill—was the result not only of great personal heroism but also of the blunders of the British. In complete control of the sea, they could have landed troops on the north side of Charlestown neck and struck the rebels in the rear while sending their main force against them face-on. But in an excess of caution they chose instead to land at the tip and march straight up against the fortified American lines. Such strategy as they had was confined to sending a single column along the thin strip of beach on the north shore of Charlestown peninsula hoping to reach the rear of the entrenchments by land and thus begin an overland encirclement. But this effort was doomed from the start. A delay in beginning the attack gave the Americans time to throw a barrier across the beach and to place behind it a company of New Hampshire riflemen capable of stopping the encircling column. The British attack therefore was altogether a frontal one, two ranks moving on a front almost half-a-mile long toward the set battle line, a line formed on the Boston Bay side by the deserted houses of Charlestown, the redoubt on Breed's Hill, its breastwork extension and a fortified rail fence, and completed on the far beach by the New Hampshiremen and their barricade.

No one of the thousands who crowded the housetops, church steeples, and shore batteries of Boston to watch the spectacle ever forgot the extraordinary scene they witnessed. June 17, 1775, was an absolutely still, brilliantly clear summer's day. Viewers in Boston only half a mile away could make out the stages of the battle clearly. The first assault was begun by the column of light infantry on the far beach, the American left flank, and was followed by the cannonading of Charlestown on the right flank, which set the town in flames; then came the slow forward movement of the main battle line: two ranks of scarlet-clad grenadiers and light infantrymen, almost 2,000 in all, marching in full kit—pounds of knapsacks, blankets, food, and ammunition—across irregular fields of knee-deep grass broken by fences and low stone walls. The American troops—no more than 1,500 men at any time, at the end only half that—held their fire until the first British line was within 150 feet of the barricades; when they fired it was almost at point-blank range, and the result was slaughter. The British front line collapsed in heaps of dead and wounded—"as thick as sheep in a field." General Howe's entire staff was wiped out in the main attack

against the rail fence. Great gaps appeared in the once parade-perfect ranks, and the survivors spun back.

But they were professional soldiers, led by experienced and determined officers with reputations to make. They quickly regrouped for the second attack, directed now squarely at the redoubt and breastwork. Again the Americans withheld fire until the last moment, and again when it came it tore the line of upright marching men to shreds: "an incessant stream of fire poured from the rebel lines," a British officer wrote, "it seemed a continued sheet of fire for near thirty minutes." The forward units fell back against the second line moving up, then turned and fled back down the hill. Some of Howe's remaining officers begged him then to break off the attack and review the situation. Instead, he called for reinforcements, ordered his troops to throw off their heavy equipment, stationed his artillery where it could rake the whole American line, and called for a third assault—a bayonet charge against the central barricades. Again the advancing line was thrown back by the defenders' fire, and again great gaps were torn in the marching ranks. But this time the fire was less intense and it could not be sustained. The 700 exhausted defenders had been sent no reinforcements; they had no supplies except what they had carried with them the night before. As the third charge neared the line of fortification their powder ran out, and though they fought desperately with everything they could lay hands on, they could no longer force the British back. Grenadiers and light infantrymen poured over the parapets and through the thin barricades, and dove into groups of defenders. The Americans turned and fled up over and around Bunker Hill to the roads that led to safety. So the battle came to an end.

Heroes on both sides redeemed, perhaps, the blunders. The American hero was above all William Prescott, in command in the redoubt, whose nerve held throughout, who steeled the small band of armed farmers, and somehow made them into an effective fighting force. Miraculously, he survived, though Joseph Warren—physician, orator, liberal spokesman, writer, who had been appointed major general but who chose to fight as a private soldier in the redoubt—was killed in the final charge. A half dozen others—John Stark, Henry Dearborn, Seth Pomeroy, and Andrew McClary—would be remembered for their valor and leadership. And the commanding officer throughout the engagement, the venerable Israel Putnam, though his original battle plan had been ill-conceived, though he failed to resupply or reinforce the defenders at the barricades, though indeed he was unable to induce the hundreds of men who watched the action from Bunker Hill and from the roadways a mere 1,000 yards from the battle to come to the aid of the defenders—"Old Put" too would be honored in the end.

For generals William Howe, Henry Clinton, and John Burgoyne the battle was an introduction to years of frustration and defeat in the American war. Howe's personal courage had been clearly demonstrated but so too had his excessive caution, his inflexible commitment to formal battle tactics, and his entire lack of a killer instinct, which would have impelled him forward to overtake the fleeing Americans and to assault the weakly held American headquarters in Cambridge. Clinton too, hastily mobilizing reinforcements and charging with them in the third assault, had shown decision and courage, and his initial proposals for encircling the peninsula by sea had been the soundest strategy of the day. But his voice was not decisive, and his role was secondary throughout. As for Burgoyne, playwright, politician, man of style and spirit—"Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne had watched the battle from the Boston battery and wrote descriptions of it, memorable in themselves, that suggest something of the mentality that would account for the strategy and failure of Saratoga.

Half of the British forces had been casualties; perhaps a third of the 1,500 Americans engaged had been killed, wounded, or captured. What did the battle prove? It proved that raw, untrained American troops could fight, and fight well—but only if they had to; that success would come to the British only if they responded flexibly and imaginatively to the unorthodox demands of warfare in colonial territories 3,000 miles from home; and finally, that if the still disunited, still legally British states of America were to fight with any hope of success a continental war against the greatest military power on earth, a leader of great personal force and of great military and political skill would have to be forthcoming.

11) Describe how the three Americans below fought and will be remembered in the battle.

a) William Prescott

b) Joseph Warren

c) Israel Putnam

12) Describe how the three British Generals viewed the battle and how their decision-making effected its outcome.

a) William Howe

b) Henry Clinton

c) John Burgoyne

13) What did the battle prove?

14) What did the battle foreshadow?

Handout 3

“The Decisive day is Come....”

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 18-20 June 1775

Directions: Read the letter and answer the questions that follow.

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 18-20 June 1775

<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17750618aa>

Sunday June 18 1775

Dearest Friend

The Day; perhaps the decisive Day is come on which the fate of America depends. My bursting Heart must find vent at my pen. I have just heard that our dear Friend Dr. Warren is no more but fell gloriously fighting for his Country -- saying better to die honourably in the field than ignominiously hang upon the Gallows. Great is our Loss. He has distinguished himself in every engagement, by his courage and fortitude, by animating the Soldiers and leading them on by his own example. A particuliar account of these dreadful, but I hope Glorious Days will be transmitted you, no doubt in the exactest manner.

The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, but the God of Israel is he that giveth strength and power unto his people. Trust in him at all times, ye people pour out your hearts before him. God is a refuge for us. -- Charlstown is laid in ashes. The Battle began upon our intrenchments upon Bunkers Hill, a Saturday morning about 3 o'clock and has not ceased yet and tis now ~~illegible~~ 3 o'clock Sabbeth afternoon.

*Tis expected they will come out over the Neck to night, and a dreadful Battle must ensue. Almighty God cover the heads of our Country men, and be a shield to our Dear Friends. How *[many have]* fallen we know not -- the constant roar of the cannon is so ~~illegible~~ *[distressing]* that we can not Eat, Drink or Sleep. May we be supported and sustained in the dreadful conflict. I shall tarry here till tis thought unsafe by my Friends, and then I have secured myself a retreat at your Brothers who has kindly offerd me part of his house. I cannot compose myself to write any further at present. I will add more as I hear further.*

Tuesday afternoon [20 June]

I have been so much agitated that I have not been able to write since Sabbeth day. When I say that ten thousand reports are passing vague and uncertain as the wind I believe I speak the Truth. I am not able to give you any authentick account of last Saturday, but you will not be destitute of inteligence. Coll. Palmer has just sent me word that he has an opportunity of conveyance. Incorrect as this scrawl will be, it shall go. I wrote you last

Saturday morning. In the afternoon I received your kind favour of the 2 June, and that you sent me by Captn. Beals at the same time. -- I ardently pray that you may be supported thro the arduous task you have before you. I wish I could contradict the report of the Doctors Death, but tis a lamentable Truth, and the tears of multitudes pay tribute to his memory. Those favorite lines [of] Collin continually sound in my Ears

*How sleep the Brave who sink to rest,
By all their Countrys wishes blest?
When Spring with dew'ey fingers cold
Returns to deck their Hallowed mould
She their shall dress a sweeter Sod
Than fancys feet has ever trod.
By fairy hands their knell is rung
By forms unseen their Dirge is sung
[There] Honour comes a pilgrim grey
To Bless the turf that wraps their Clay
And freedom shall a while repair
To Dwell a weeping Hermit there.*

I rejoice in the prospect of the plenty you inform me of, but cannot say we have the same agreeable veiw here. The drought is very severe, and things look but poorly.

Mr. Rice and Thaxter, unkle Quincy, Col. Quincy, Mr. Wibert all desire to be rememberd, so do all ~~the rest~~ of our ~~the~~ family. Nabby will write by the next conveyance.

I must close, as the Deacon [waits]. I have not pretended to be perticular with regard to what I have heard, because I know you will collect better intelligence. The Spirits of the people are very good. The loss of Charlstown affects them no more than a Drop in the Bucket. -- I am Most sincerely yours,

Portia

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 18-20 June 1775 [electronic edition] *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams>

Questions

- 1) What is the date of the letter?

- 2) How does Abigail address her husband John?

3) In what ways does Abigail immediately command the reader's attention in the first paragraph?

4) Who died on the battle field?

5) Can you tell anything about Abigail's attitudes toward the colonists from this letter?

6) Touchstones are tangible and intangible things in life to which we turn in times of crisis. They help to comfort us and give us strength to deal with our struggles in challenging times. From the letter that you just read, what are the "touchstones" in Abigail Adams' life that give her strength and comfort?

7) How does Abigail describe Charlestown?

8) Why can't they "eat, drink or sleep?"

9) In addition to the battle, what other potential problems does Abigail face?

10) Is this a good historical source? Why or Why not? What does this letter offer to the reader?

Handout 4

Exact View of The Late Battle at Charlestown and View of the Attack on Bunker's Hill

Directions:

- 1) Look at the two “views” or engravings of the Battle of Bunker Hill.
- 2) Compare and contrast each “view” in the chart below.
- 3) Answer the comprehension questions.

View of the Attack **<http://www.masshist.org/bh/view.html>**

Study the engraving and describe what you see:

People:

Events:

Objects:

Handout 6

Broadside Assignment

What is a broadside?

A broadside is a type of newspaper, usually a single sheet, that was posted in a public place to describe important events of the day. They were a common form of “mass” communication during the 18th and 19th centuries. Broadside described local and national events, announcements, governmental proclamations, plays, and even satires.

Directions:

- 1) Read the broadside account of the Battle of Bunker Hill: *By an Express arrived at Philadelphia on Saturday evening, last we have the following account of the battle at Charlestown, on Saturday the 18th of June, Instant.*
(<http://masshist.org/bh/broadside.html>)
- 2) Create your own Broadside of a news event that has had great impact upon your life.

Handout 7

Letter from John Quincy Adams to Joseph Sturge, March 1846

“The year 1775 was the eighth year of my age -- Among the first fruits of the War, was the expulsion of my father's family from their peaceful abode in Boston, to take refuge in his and my native town of Braintree -- Boston became a walled and beleaguered town -- garrisoned by British Grenadiers with Thomas Gage their commanding General, commissioned Governor of the Province -- For the space of twelve months my mother with her infant children dwelt, liable every hour of the day and of the night to be butchered in cold blood, or taken and carried into Boston as hostages, by any foraging or marauding detachment of men, like that actually sent forth on the 19th. Of April, to capture John Hancock and Samuel Adams on their way to attend the continental Congress at Philadelphia -- My father was separated from his family, on his way to attend the same continental Congress, and there my mother, with her children lived in unintermitted danger of being consumed with them all in a conflagration kindled by a torch in the same hands which on the 17th. Of June lighted the fires of Charlestown -- I saw with my own eyes those fires, and heard Britannia's thunders in the Battle of Bunker's hill and witnessed the tears of my mother and mingled with them my own, at the fall of Warren a dear friend of my father, and a beloved Physician to me. He had been our family physician and surgeon, and had saved my fore finger from amputation under a very bad fracture -- Even in the days of heathen and conquering Rome the Laureate of Augustus Caesar tells us that wars were detested by Mothers -- Even by Roman mothers...”

Letter from John Quincy Adams to Joseph Sturge, March 1896, *The Decisive Day is Come: The Battle of Bunker Hill*, Massachusetts Historical Society, <http://masshist.org/bh/jqa.html>

Answer the following questions:

1) How does memory sometimes play “tricks” upon people?

2) In what ways does John Quincy Adams remember the event?

3) For whom was it a more important event, him or his mother?

4) In what ways would an event like this one shape the future of an eight year old boy?

5) What does John Quincy Adams's description of his mother say about the role of women in colonial America?

6) How does Adams describe conditions in Boston and the British? What is the difference between memory and enhanced memory? Is this depiction actual memory or enhanced memory?