

# The American Revolution: The Boston Massacre, "Yankee Doodle," and the Declaration of Independence, 1770–1776



*Paul Revere, The Bloody Massacre Perpetrated in King-Street Boston on March 5th 1770 by a Party of the 29th Reg., Boston, 1770. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC01868)*

THE GILDER LEHRMAN  
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# The American Revolution: The Boston Massacre, “Yankee Doodle,” and the Declaration of Independence, 1770–1776

BY TIM BAILEY, STEVEN SCHWARTZ, AND SANDRA TRENHOLM (created in 2015, revised in 2024)

*Tim Bailey taught middle school and elementary school in Utah for over two decades. Named the 2009 National History Teacher of the Year, he is the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s director of curriculum development and instructional design. Steven Schwartz taught and supervised social studies in New York City for over thirty years. He worked at the Gilder Lehrman Institute as an education coordinator and senior education fellow. Sandra Trenholm is the director and curator of the Gilder Lehrman Collection.*

**GRADE LEVELS:** 3–5

**RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION:** Four 45-minute class periods

## UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on visual and textual primary and secondary source materials. These skills will enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate documents and other resources of historical significance.

Over the course of four lessons, students will explore the Revolutionary era through three primary sources: an image of the Boston Massacre, the song “Yankee Doodle,” and the preamble to the Declaration of Independence. These primary sources provide three ways to understand how patriots cultivated popular support for the American Revolution. Students will closely analyze these sources and use visual and textual evidence to draw conclusions. They will demonstrate their knowledge by answering critical thinking questions, restating ideas in their own words, and participating in class discussion.

Students will be able to

- Identify important elements in an image
- Explain and evaluate the extent to which a song or poem reflects the history and culture of a society
- Analyze and assess how patriots depicted historical circumstances, events, and situations
- Explain the significance of an important historical event (e.g., the American Revolution)

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What themes and ideas did patriots hope would motivate fellow colonists to join the Revolution?
- What methods did patriots use to try to convince other colonists to join the cause?

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 and RI.5.1: Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.2 and RI.5.2: Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.4 and RI.5.4: Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words or phrases in a text relevant to a grade 4 or 5 topic or subject area.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.9: Integrate information from several texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.1D: Review the key ideas expressed and explain their own ideas and understanding in light of the discussion.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.1.D: Review the key ideas expressed and draw conclusions in light of information and knowledge gained from the discussions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher led) with diverse partners on grade 5 topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.2: Summarize a written text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.5: Include multimedia components (e.g., graphics, sound) and visual displays in presentations when appropriate to enhance the development of main ideas or themes.

## MATERIALS

- Source 1: Paul Revere, *The Bloody Massacre Perpetrated in King-Street Boston on March 5th 1770 by a Party of the 29th Reg.*, Boston, 1770, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC01868
- Activity Sheet 1: Analyzing the Image
- Teacher's Resource: A Guide to Paul Revere's *The Bloody Massacre*, 1770, from "Paul Revere's engraving of the Boston Massacre, 1770," Spotlight on a Primary Source, History Resources, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, [gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/paul-reveres-engraving-boston-massacre-1770](http://gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/paul-reveres-engraving-boston-massacre-1770)
- Magnifying glass (optional)
- Overhead projector, Smartboard, or other method of display
- Source 2: "The Origins of 'Yankee Doodle'"
- Activity Sheet 2: "The Origins of 'Yankee Doodle'": Critical Thinking Questions
- Source 3: Selected Verses from "Yankee Doodle"

- Activity Sheet 3: “Yankee Doodle” in Your Own Words
- Source 4: The Preamble to the Declaration of Independence
- Activity Sheet 4: Summarizing the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence
- Activity Sheet 5: Recruiting Patriots!

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### Turning Colonists into Patriots

by Denver Brunzman, The George Washington University

The idea of Americans as a separate people is easy to take for granted, but it only came about during the American Revolution. Traditionally defined as a period stretching from the early 1760s through the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783), the American Revolution involved both resistance against British rule and the creation of a new American identity. In place of Britain’s hierarchical society and monarchical government headed by a king or queen, American revolutionaries hoped to create a more equal society, especially for White men (women, African Americans, and Native Americans would have to contest for generations for equal rights), and republican government based on the principle of representation.

These changes did not come quickly or easily. On the eve of American independence in 1776, historians estimate that, at most, 40 percent of the population self-identified as ardent American patriots who supported separation from Britain. About 20 percent of American colonists remained fervently loyal to the British Crown. In addition to these loyalists, an estimated 40 percent of colonists were neutral. Put another way, at the time of American independence, a majority of the American people did not actively support the American revolutionary cause.

Winning broad support from the American people, especially among those who identified as neutral, was critical to the success of the American Revolution. The effort depended heavily on creating a new American identity through political symbols, propaganda, and other works, none more influential than the three primary sources in this lesson: Paul Revere’s image of the Boston Massacre, the preamble to the Declaration of Independence, and the song “Yankee Doodle.”

The process of defining a new American people unfolded in stages. First, in the 1760s and 1770s, American colonists resisted a number of British policies that colonists believed treated them unfairly. On the evening of March 5, 1770, after being hit with snowballs, rocks, and other projectiles by a Boston crowd, British soldiers fired upon and killed five American colonists, including Crispus Attucks, a maritime worker of African and Native American descent. Paul Revere’s engraving *The Bloody Massacre*, based on an earlier print by the artist Henry Pelham, soon emerged as the most popular image of the event. A masterful work of propaganda, Revere’s engraving removed any nuance by depicting bloodthirsty British soldiers firing maliciously into an innocent Boston crowd. Thanks largely to Revere’s work, the tragic events of March 5, 1770, became known as the “Boston Massacre” and helped to legitimize American resistance to British rule.

It still took more than six years and the onset of war between Britain and the American colonists before the Second Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. The Declaration had a practical purpose of communicating the reasons for America’s break from Britain, but it also had a deeper political purpose of attracting domestic and foreign support for the new American nation. The preamble (second paragraph) of the Declaration helped to forge a new American identity by enumerating principles of human rights and representative government that served as a “blueprint” for the new American nation, including equality and the inviolable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The Declaration of Independence could not alone secure American independence or define what it meant to be American. Early Americans had to fight a war for eight years against Britain, during which time they also began to create a new national culture. The song “Yankee Doodle” demonstrates how an American identity emerged directly from a British foundation. The song first became popular in America during the French and Indian War (1754–1763) when British soldiers mocked American colonists as “doodles” (fools or simpletons). In the original version, words like “dandy” lampooned the uncultured, unsophisticated colonists who supposedly thought they could be the height of fashion by simply putting a feather in their caps.

During the Revolutionary War, American soldiers and their supporters transformed “Yankee Doodle” from a parody of American colonists to an expression of American patriotism and pride. With their new republican government, based on the principle of equality, it became a badge of honor for Americans to be regarded as simple people, or “doodles.” The chorus remained the same: “Yankee Doodle keep it up, Yankee Doodle dandy! Mind the music and the step, and with the girls be handy!” But numerous versions and new verses (nearly two hundred) emerged, and Americans sang the song after winning major battles, including at Saratoga (1777) and Yorktown (1781).

Together, the Boston Massacre image, preamble to the Declaration of Independence, and “Yankee Doodle” demonstrate the larger process of how a new American identity developed during the American Revolution. Before the Revolution, American colonists considered themselves proud, loyal British subjects. It was only through concerted action, including stirring words and images, that the American people shed their Britishness and embraced a new American identity.

*Denver Brunzman is an associate professor of history and department chair at The George Washington University. He is the author of The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World (2013) and co-author of a leading US history textbook, Liberty, Equality, Power: A History of the American People (2016; 2020).*

## LESSON 1

# The Boston Massacre, 1770

BY TIM BAILEY, STEVEN SCHWARTZ, AND SANDRA TRENHOLM (created in 2015, revised in 2024)

### OVERVIEW

Students will gain a clear understanding of the content and message of Paul Revere's print *The Bloody Massacre Perpetrated in King-Street*. They will analyze the components of the image, draw logical inferences, and demonstrate understanding by completing an activity sheet, explaining their responses, and comparing their responses to the historical interpretation provided.

### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What themes and ideas did patriots hope would motivate fellow colonists to join the Revolution?
- What methods did patriots use to try to convince other colonists to join the cause?

### MATERIALS

- Source 1: Paul Revere, *The Bloody Massacre Perpetrated in King-Street Boston on March 5th 1770 by a Party of the 29th Reg.*, Boston, 1770, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC01868
- Activity Sheet 1: Analyzing the Image
- Teacher's Resource: A Guide to Paul Revere's *The Bloody Massacre, 1770*, from "Paul Revere's engraving of the Boston Massacre, 1770," Spotlight on a Primary Source, History Resources, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, [gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/paul-reveres-engraving-boston-massacre-1770](http://gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/paul-reveres-engraving-boston-massacre-1770)
- Magnifying glass (optional)
- Overhead projector, Smartboard, or other method of display

### PROCEDURE

1. Divide the class into critical thinking groups of three to five students. Give careful consideration to how students are grouped in order to encourage maximum interaction.

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**GRADE LEVELS:** 3–5

**RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION:** One 45-minute class period

**UNIT OVERVIEW:** This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on visual and textual primary and secondary source materials. Over the course of four lessons, students will explore the Revolutionary era through three primary sources: an image of the Boston Massacre, the song "Yankee Doodle," and the preamble to the Declaration of Independence. These primary sources provide three ways to understand how patriots cultivated popular support for the American Revolution.

2. You may share a brief explanation of the events of March 5, 1770, with the students. For example,

On the night of March 5, 1770, American colonists and British soldiers in Boston engaged in a violent confrontation. The soldiers fired on the crowd and killed five of the Bostonians. This event became known as the “Boston Massacre,” a rallying point for colonists against the presence of British troops throughout the colonies and against the Townshend Acts, which the British soldiers had been deployed to enforce. Paul Revere’s well-known engraving is but one version of the event.

Do not reveal additional information at this point since you want the students to use the document to decipher the events.

3. Tell students they will “read like a detective” in order to analyze a broadside (a poster meant for display in public places like taverns or in people’s homes) for clues to how Paul Revere interpreted what happened on March 5, 1770. Explain that art is often used to shape viewers’ opinions about events or people. Often the evidence in prints such as *The Bloody Massacre* requires a careful “reading” of the image to decipher the message.
4. Distribute Source 1, Paul Revere’s engraving *The Bloody Massacre Perpetrated in King-Street*, and the Analyzing the Image activity sheet. It may be useful to display the image and/or provide the students with magnifying glasses to help them pick out details in the print. Ask the students to study the image for five minutes, discuss the image in their groups, and record their findings on their Analyzing the Image activity sheet.

Advise the students to list everything they see in the print without ascribing labels, additional interpretation, or meaning. For example, a man in a red coat holding a sword, not a British officer ordering soldiers to fire.

5. Reconvene the class to discuss the elements in the image. Use the list in the Teacher’s Resource: A Guide to Paul Revere’s *The Bloody Massacre, 1770*, to help point out hidden elements that students may have overlooked. Throughout the discussion ask students, Why do you think Paul Revere included that in the print?
6. Ask the following questions to guide the discussion:
  - What do you think is happening in this image?
  - What do you see that shapes your opinion or strikes you as being interesting?
  - Examine the faces of the people in the image. How would you describe the British soldiers? How would you describe the colonists?
  - How many signs can you read in the print? What do they say? Where are they located?
  - Are there any unexpected figures in the print (i.e., the dog, the woman)? Why do you think they are there?
  - Based on your interpretation of this image, who is at fault in this violent encounter? How do you know?



7. To conclude the lesson and check for comprehension, ask the students to note how closely their group analysis compares to the historical evidence about the Boston Massacre. We don't know exactly what happened on March 5, 1770, but this is a summary of the historical context:

By the beginning of 1770, there were 4,000 British soldiers in Boston, a city with 15,000 inhabitants. Tensions were running high because of the Quartering Act (which forced colonists to take British soldiers into their homes), labor unrest, and a lack of jobs in the city. On the evening of March 5, crowds of day laborers, apprentices, and merchant sailors began to pelt British soldiers with snowballs and rocks. A shot rang out, and then several soldiers fired their weapons. When the skirmish was over, five civilians lay dead or dying, including Crispus Attucks, an African American merchant sailor who had probably escaped from slavery more than twenty years earlier.

Produced just three weeks after the Boston Massacre, Paul Revere's *The Bloody Massacre Perpetrated in King-Street* was probably the most effective piece of war propaganda in American history. Not an accurate depiction of the event, it shows an orderly line of British soldiers firing into an American crowd and includes a poem that Revere probably wrote himself. Revere based his engraving on one by the artist Henry Pelham, who created the first illustration of the episode—and who was neither paid nor credited for his work.

## “Yankee Doodle”

BY TIM BAILEY, STEVEN SCHWARTZ, AND SANDRA TRENHOLM (created in 2015, revised in 2024)

### OVERVIEW

In this lesson the students will examine “Yankee Doodle,” the song most associated with the American Revolution. They will read and answer questions about the origins of the song and use critical thinking skills to demonstrate their understanding of the relationship between the song and its historical context. They will then restate each of the provided verses in their own words.

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

- What methods did patriots use to try to convince other colonists to join the cause?

### MATERIALS

- Source 2: “The Origins of ‘Yankee Doodle’”
- Activity Sheet 2: “The Origins of ‘Yankee Doodle’”: Critical Thinking Questions
- Source 3: Selected Verses from “Yankee Doodle”
- Activity Sheet 3: “Yankee Doodle” in Your Own Words

### PROCEDURE

1. Divide the class into critical thinking groups of three to five students.
2. Distribute the reading, “The Origins of ‘Yankee Doodle.’”
3. “Share read” the text with the students. To share read, have the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to read aloud, still serving as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).

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**GRADE LEVELS:** 3–5

**RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION:** One 45-minute class period

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4. Distribute Activity Sheet 2, the critical thinking questions for “The Origins of ‘Yankee Doodle.’” Ask the students the first question. Demonstrate how to support answers with evidence taken directly from the text of “The Origins of ‘Yankee Doodle.’”
5. The students should work together in their groups to develop an evidentiary answer for each question.
6. Distribute Source 3, Selected Verses from “Yankee Doodle,” and either listen to a performance of the song or have the students sing the song with you.
7. Distribute Activity Sheet 3, “Yankee Doodle” in Your Own Words.
8. Students will close read “Yankee Doodle,” one verse at a time, and restate each verse in their own words. For instance, the verse at bottom left could be restated as “Captain Davis grabbed his gun and attached a bayonet.” Some of the vocabulary will be unfamiliar, and it will take some interpretation to come up with the meaning.
9. Wrap-up: You may use the following question as a guide for a class discussion or a written assignment: How did the colonists turn an insulting song into a patriotic one?

## LESSON 3

# The Preamble to the Declaration of Independence, 1776

BY TIM BAILEY, STEVEN SCHWARTZ, AND SANDRA TRENHOLM (created in 2015, revised in 2024)

### OVERVIEW

Students will read and analyze the preamble to the Declaration of Independence, the second of the five sections of the Declaration. They will demonstrate their understanding by restating in their own words each central concept of the Declaration's preamble.

### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What themes and ideas did patriots hope would motivate fellow colonists to join the Revolution?
- What methods did patriots use to try to convince other colonists to join the cause?

### MATERIALS

- Source 4: The Preamble to the Declaration of Independence
- Activity Sheet 4: Summarizing the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence

### PROCEDURE

1. You may choose to have the students work individually, as partners, or in small groups of three to five students.
2. Discuss the information in the Historical Background. Explain that Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration in five parts: the introduction, preamble, grievances against the king, appeals to the king, and conclusion, in which he declared the country's right to be free and independent of Great Britain.
3. Distribute Source 4, The Preamble to the Declaration of Independence.
4. Share read the text with the students as described in Lesson 2.
5. Distribute Activity Sheet 3, Summarizing the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence. You may choose to display the activity sheet for the entire class. This activity is designed to build critical thinking skills and help the students develop effective strategies for reading difficult texts. The

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vocabulary will be the most difficult barrier. Let students discuss possible meanings for the unfamiliar words, and only provide definitions or synonyms when they are truly stuck.

6. If necessary, show the students how to use their answers to the questions to construct a summary. For example, “It’s obvious that people were created equal and that God gave them the right to live free and pursue their dreams. Governments were made by people to protect their rights, and if the government won’t protect those rights, then the people can make a new government. This new government must make sure that people are safe and happy. But don’t throw out the government without a really good reason. People will put up with bad things just because they don’t like to change what they’re used to; but if the government keeps abusing people’s rights, then you need a new government that can provide security for the future.”
7. Lead a class discussion on how the ideas in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence have shaped the United States and its government, even to this day. Make sure that students use quotations from the text to illustrate or support their points.

## LESSON 4

# Recruiting Patriots!

BY TIM BAILEY, STEVEN SCHWARTZ, AND SANDRA TRENHOLM (created in 2015, revised in 2024)

### OVERVIEW

Students will use the primary sources that they analyzed in Lessons 1–3 in order to discuss and then answer the following question: In what ways did patriots try to convince other colonists to join their cause?

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

- What methods did patriots use to try to convince other colonists to join the cause?

### MATERIALS

- Source 1: Paul Revere, *The Bloody Massacre Perpetrated in King-Street Boston on March 5th 1770 by a Party of the 29th Reg.*, Boston, 1770, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC01868
- Activity Sheet 1: Analyzing the Image
- Source 2: “The Origins of ‘Yankee Doodle’”
- Activity Sheet 2: “The Origins of ‘Yankee Doodle’”: Critical Thinking Questions
- Source 3: Selected Verses from “Yankee Doodle”
- Activity Sheet 3: “Yankee Doodle” in Your Own Words
- Source 4: The Preamble to the Declaration of Independence
- Activity Sheet 4: Summarizing the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence
- Activity Sheet 5: Recruiting Patriots!

### PROCEDURE

1. Students may complete the summative assessment activity either by themselves or working with a partner or small group.

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2. Based on the readings from Lessons 1–3 and their analysis of the readings, students will answer the following prompt: What methods did patriots use to try to convince other colonists to join the cause?
3. Depending on the students' ability level, you may have them complete the Recruiting Patriots! activity sheet to facilitate a class discussion or have them use the information in the activity sheet as the basis for a short essay responding to the Essential Questions. In either case students should cite evidence from the primary sources in their responses.