

Battle of Lexington Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:
What happened at the Battle of Lexington?

Materials:

- Copies of Document A
- Copies of Document B
- Battle of Lexington PowerPoint
- Copies of Battle of Lexington Images Handout
- Copies of Guiding Questions

Plan of Instruction:

Note: Before this lesson, students should know about the conflict between American colonists and British authorities leading up to the Battle of Lexington. Students should also have been previously introduced to the Battle of Lexington. You can accomplish this by having students read a textbook excerpt or by providing a brief lecture on the topic. Regardless of format, students should be familiar with the battle and the events leading up to it.

1. Free-Write. Have students free-write in response to this prompt: What do you know about the Battle of Lexington?

Share Out. Make sure to establish the following:

- a. The Battle of Lexington is considered the first battle of the American Revolution.
 - b. The battle started when a group of colonial militiamen met British troops on Lexington's town green on April 19, 1775.
 - c. The British were marching from Boston to look for military supplies reportedly stored in Concord by members of local militias.
 - d. Other American colonists had given the militiamen advance notice of the British troops' march toward Lexington and Concord.
2. Battle of Lexington PowerPoint.
 - a. Slide 1: Title slide. *The battle was a chaotic event, and there are many conflicting accounts of what took place. One of the most contested questions about the Battle of Lexington continues to be "Who fired the first shot?"*
 - b. Slide 2: Central Historical Question. *Today we are going to be exploring a series of documents in order to answer these questions: What happened at the Battle of Lexington? And, who fired the first shot?*

Note: At first, do **not** tell students who created the two images or when they were painted. If students ask about the artists or the dates of creation, tell them that those are excellent questions that will be addressed shortly.

- c. Slide 3: Image 1. In pairs, ask students to answer the questions from the Battle of Lexington Images Handout for Image 1.

Share out. Students may note the following:

- i. Participants: The British soldiers are wearing matching red coats and are standing in neat lines. In contrast, the American colonists don't have uniforms and seem to be less organized than the British.
 - ii. Location: The battle appears to be taking place on a green near a town. There are buildings in the background.
 - iii. Actions of the colonists: The colonists look angry and defiant. There is a colonist with a fist raised toward the British. They seem to be standing up to the British.
 - iv. Casualties: There are several colonists lying on the ground. It doesn't look like any of the British soldiers have been wounded.
 - v. First shot: Although there is smoke surrounding the British soldiers, it is not clear who fired the first shot.
- d. Slide 4: Image 2. *As historians, we never want to accept a single account as evidence of what happened in the past, So, let's look at a second depiction of the battle.*

In pairs, ask students to answer the questions from the Battle of Lexington Images Handout for Image 2.

Share out. Students may note the following:

- i. Participants: The British soldiers are once again wearing matching red coats and standing in neat lines. And the American colonists once again seem to be less organized than the British and don't have matching uniforms.
- ii. Location: The location seems to be the same as Image 1. The buildings seem to be the same. Although the British soldiers and colonists once again are on the town green, it is brown rather than green.
- iii. Actions of the colonists: Instead of defiantly fighting the British, the colonists appear to be fleeing.
- iv. Actions of the British troops: It looks like the British are firing at the fleeing colonists.

- v. Casualties: There are many colonists who appear to have been killed or wounded.
- vi. First shot: Although there is smoke surrounding the British soldiers, it is not clear who fired the first shot.

Ask students: *Which image do you think presents a more trustworthy account of the Battle of Lexington? What other information would you want to know about the images to better understand the Battle of Lexington? What information would you want to help determine who fired the first shot?*

Note: Hopefully, students will address the importance of knowing who made these paintings and when they were made.

- e. Slide 5: Images of the Battle of Lexington. Share with students that *Canadian artist Henry Sandham made the first image in 1886. The Lexington Historical Society paid Sandham to commemorate the heroism of their forefathers. Thomas Doolittle, a silversmith, made the second image, an engraving, in the fall of 1775. Doolittle was a member of a Connecticut militia that was called up to Cambridge, Massachusetts, following the Battles of Lexington and Concord. He went to Lexington and spoke to individuals involved in the battle. Afterwards, he created the engraving.*
 - i. In pairs, ask students to discuss whether this information influences their evaluation of these documents.
 - ii. Share out. Students may note the following:
 1. The gap in time between when the battle took place and when Sandham made his painting may lead to questions about the painting's accuracy.
 2. The Lexington Historical Society paid Sandham to make his painting. This may have influenced how he chose to represent the battle.
 3. By 1886, Sandham may have had access to more accounts of the battle than Doolittle had. If we knew about the research Sandham did before making his painting, we could use that information to help evaluate the painting's trustworthiness.
 4. Doolittle spoke to participants of the battle and created his engraving soon afterwards, which might make his account more reliable.

5. On the other hand, Doolittle was a member of a militia, and he may have been trying to portray the British in a negative light.

Note: Make sure to highlight how each painting might be considered both trustworthy and untrustworthy. Ultimately, as historians, we need to examine other types of evidence to address the Central Historical Questions of who fired first and what happened at the Battle of Lexington.

3. Explain to students that to continue investigating what happened at Lexington and who fired the first shot, they will now analyze two documents from people who participated in the battle.
4. Pass out Document A and the Guiding Questions.
 - a. Explain to students that before they read the document, they are going to *source* it. Historian source documents to know who made them, when, and for what purposes.
 - b. Have students answer the Sourcing Questions. Share out responses. Students may note the following:
 - i. Barker was an officer in the British army.
 - ii. The document is a diary entry. Discuss with students that although we may think of diaries as private, Barker likely knew that others would read his diary at some point. He might have written this to record what happened in case there was an investigation into the battle. It is important to remind students that the War for Independence had not yet begun, and the colonists were still British citizens. Barker's troops killed eight colonists. He might have reasoned that this would cause more conflict between the colonists and the British government.
 - c. In pairs, students read the document and answer the rest of the Guiding Questions. Share out. Students may note the following:
 - i. Barker says a large number of colonists were waiting for the British on the green in Lexington.
 - ii. Barker claims the colonists fired first and that the British were not intending to attack.
 - iii. Barker says that his men were “wild” and “could hear no orders.” It is possible that he is trying to blame his men for what happened. It is also possible that his men did fire without orders.

- iv. Barker's account is similar to Doolittle's engraving because he says the colonists fled. Like both Doolittle and Sandham's works, he says that the battle took place on the green in Lexington.
 - v. Barker was present at the battle, which may make his account more reliable. On the other hand, he may have been motivated to blame the colonists and his own men for the bloodshed in order to avoid getting in trouble.
5. Pass out Document B.
- a. Individually, students answer the Sourcing Questions. Share out responses. Students may note the following:
 - i. The document is sworn testimony by 34 colonists.
 - ii. The testimony was given six days after the battle, so the colonists might have been able to talk to one another and agree to tell the same story.
 - b. In pairs, students read the document and answer the rest of the Guiding Questions. Share out. Students may note the following:
 - i. Mulliken and the other colonists claimed the British fired first and continued to fire after the colonists had turned to flee.
 - ii. The colonists say that "to our knowledge" none of them fired first.
 - iii. Students may question whether 34 colonists truly would all have the exact same description of what happened during a chaotic battle early in the morning. Moreover, they may wonder why the colonists gave this sworn testimony. Students may hypothesize that the colonists wanted evidence to prove that they were not responsible for the battle.
6. Final Discussion:
- a. What are the similarities and differences between these documents?
 - i. Students should note that all of the documents except the Sandham painting indicate that the colonists fled the green. In fact, only the Sandham image depicts resistance by colonists.
 - ii. In contrast, all of the documents are in general agreement on who participated in the battle, where the battle took place, and when it occurred.
 - b. Can we answer the question of who fired first?
 - i. Students should note that evidence about who fired first is contradictory. However, students can construct arguments regarding who fired first based on their evaluation of the available evidence.
 - ii. It is important to point out to students that although we may not be able to definitively identify who fired first, the documents are in complete agreement on many other aspects of the battle (participants, location, timing). And, three

- out of the four documents indicate that there was not a sustained battle between the British troops and the colonists.
- c. Which document do you think provides a more trustworthy account of what happened at the Battle of Lexington? Why?
 - d. What other types of documents might you want to examine to further study what happened at the Battle of Lexington?

Sources

Henry Sandham (1886), *The Dawn of Liberty, Lexington, 1775*.

Amos Doolittle (1775), *The Battle of Lexington*.

Document A: John Barker, diary entry, April 19th, 1775, in R. H. Dana, Jr. (1877). A British officer in Boston. *Atlantic Monthly*, 39, 389-401.

Document B: Nathaniel Mulliken, Philip Russell, Sworn Testimony, in C. C. Sawtell, (1968). *The Nineteenth of April, 1775: A Collection of First Hand Accounts*. Lincoln, MA: Sawtells of Somerset.

Document A: Barker (Modified)

19th. At 2 o'clock we began our march by wading through a very long stream up to our middles. About 5 miles away from a town called Lexington, we heard there were some hundreds of people collected together intending to oppose us. At 5 o'clock we arrived there and saw a number of people, I believe between 200 and 300, formed in a common in the middle of the town. We still continued advancing, keeping prepared against an attack though without intending to attack them. As we came near them, they fired one or two shots, upon which our men without any orders, fired and put them to flight. We then formed on the Common, but with some difficulty, the men were so wild they could hear no orders; we waited a considerable time there, and at length proceeded on our way to Concord.

Source: *Entry for April 19, 1775, from the diary of Lieutenant John Barker, an officer in the British army.*

Document B: Colonists (Modified)

We Nathaniel Mulliken, Philip Russell, (Followed by the names of 32 other men present on Lexington Green on April 19, 1775) . . . all of lawful age, and inhabitants of Lexington . . . do testify and declare, that on the nineteenth of April, about five o'clock in the morning, we proceeded towards the Green, and saw a large body of troops marching towards us. Some of our men were coming to the Green, and others had reached it, at which time, they began to disperse. While our backs were turned on the British troops, they fired on us, and a number of our men were instantly killed and wounded, not a gun was fired by any person in our company on the British soldiers to our knowledge before they fired on us, and continued firing until we had all made our escape.

Lexington, April 25, 1775.

Source: *Sworn by 34 minutemen on April 25, 1775, before three justices of the peace.*

Battle of Lexington Images

Image 1

What do you see in this image?

What evidence does it provide about what happened at the Battle of Lexington?

Image 2

What do you see in this image?

What evidence does it provide about what happened at the Battle of Lexington?

How is Image 2 similar to Image 1?

How is Image 2 different from Image 1?

Battle of Lexington

Document A

Sourcing (Answer these questions before reading the document.)

- 1) Who was John Barker?

- 2) What kind of document is this?

- 3) When was this written?

- 4) What do you predict this document will say?

Close Reading

- 5) According to this document, what happened at the Battle of Lexington?

- 6) According to this document, who fired the first shot at the Battle of Lexington?

Reliability

- 7) Do you think this document provides a trustworthy account of what happened at the Battle of Lexington? Why or why not?

Document B

Sourcing (Answer these questions before reading the document)

- 1) Who were the authors of this document?

- 2) What kind of document is this?

- 3) When was this written?

- 4) What do you predict this document will say?

Close Reading and Corroboration

- 5) What details about the Battle of Lexington do Documents A and B have in common?

- 6) What details about the battle are different?

Reliability

- 7) Do you think this document provides a trustworthy account of what happened at the Battle of Lexington? Why or why not?