

Common People of the American Revolution

Lesson Plan Ideas

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Objective: To treat common people as political players who make strategic decisions and take historically significant actions.

Applicable courses: United States history at any level (with appropriate adjustments for age); civics.

Key definition: “Common people” are all those who do not enjoy the special privileges coming from wealth, prestige, or political power.

Rationale: Why do we need to include common people in the telling of history?

(1) As a simple matter of social justice, these people should be given the credit that is their due. Pharaohs did not build the pyramids by themselves, nor did kings and presidents “make history” on their own.

(2) If we want to tell a complete story and get it right, we have no choice but to include a full range of historical personages.

(3) If we marginalize common people of the past, we learn how to marginalize common people in the present. Through the study of history, students internalize the dynamics of the political process; typically, they study history for at least six years before undertaking a study of politics per se. When they read or hear that Washington marched against Cornwallis at Yorktown, they learn to view wars as chess games between military or political leaders. Unwittingly, they learn to ignore or at least marginalize the soldiers and civilians who actually fight and die in wars, both past and present.

The first two concerns are increasingly addressed in our multi-cultural texts. The third is more problematic. Common people must be included not only in side-bars, but in the core narratives of the main texts. They need to be treated as viable political agents, acting purposively and significantly in pursuit of their own interests and ideals. Only then will they serve as models for true citizenship in a democratic and inclusive society.

Background resources: Ray Raphael, *People’s History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence* (New Press, 2001; HarperCollins, 2002); *The First American Revolution: Before Lexington and Concord* (New Press, 2002); *Founding Myths: Stories that Hide our Patriotic Past* (New Press, 2004).

Anticipatory Set: Brief presentation to the class, along the following lines. Did you know that the American Revolution was the largest Indian War in our nation’s history? Did you know that 17 of George Washington’s slaves and 30 of Thomas Jefferson’s slaves fled to the British in search of their freedom? Did you know that Lexington was not the beginning of the American Revolution? The first “revolution,” or overthrow of an existing government, happened the year before, when common farmers from throughout

Massachusetts toppled all British authority. (For more, see Introduction to *People's History*.)

We don't usually hear about these stories because common people are not often taken seriously. They should be. We will take their actions seriously by placing ourselves in their places. How would *you* have responded if you were an Indian at the time of the American Revolution, or a slave on Washington's plantation, or a farmer in Massachusetts who had just lost the power of his vote?

Procedures: Simulations of four different situations, set forth on separate sheets below.

1. A council of Iroquois Indians in upstate New York, 1777, trying to decide which side to support in the Revolutionary War.
2. Slaves on George Washington's Mount Vernon plantation in Virginia, 1781, trying to decide whether or not to flee to the British.
3. A town meeting in Massachusetts, 1774, trying to decide how to respond to being deprived of the right to self-government.
4. A caucus of private soldiers in 1780, discussing how to respond to a lack of provisions.

Any one of these can stand alone, but the objective will be better achieved with more than one. If time is a constraint, the class could split up into sections, each engaging in one simulation.

Individual assignments and assessments: These will vary according to grade level. When appropriate, students can write up and defend their chosen courses of actions. Some writing might focus on the decision-making process, on either the individual or collective level.

Situation #1: An Iroquois council in upstate New York, 1777. Both British officers and American rebels have been trying to convince the Iroquois to become their allies in the Revolutionary War. At this particular council, British representatives have come with a lavish display of gifts. All adult Iroquois are allowed to attend this council, men and women alike.

Each student creates and assumes a character: a young warrior, an older sachem (political leader), a young or old woman, a British officer. (Older students who can prepare for this exercise by reading the appropriate section of *People's History* might choose to become one of the characters featured in the book: Cornplanter, Joseph Brant, Blacksnake, Mary Jemison.) In deliberate and dignified style, appropriate to an Indian council, they debate the course of action they should take. Relevant points to consider:

*White settlers from New York have been moving closer and closer to Seneca lands.

*Two Iroquois nations (the Oneidas and Tuscaroras), living in areas already settled by whites, have been leaning toward siding with the Americans. Their missionary, Samuel Kirkland, has supplied them with material support while teaching them Christianity.

*Back in 1763, the British told white colonists they could not settle in lands to the west of the Appalachian Mountains, where most of the Iroquois live. In 1768 the British promised these people they could keep their lands.

*The British, being richer, give better gifts than the Americans.

*Most whites in upstate New York are fighting on the side of the Americans. A small community of Scottish people is siding with the British. The American military presence in the area is very strong. There are more white American militiamen than Iroquois warriors.

*The Iroquois have a strong warrior tradition.

*Some of the older sachems, who have lived through previous wars, express great concern about the impact of a large war on their people.

What should the Iroquois do? The council has to weigh all the alternatives and come to a collective decision.

Situation #2: George Washington's Mount Vernon plantation in Virginia, 1781. The British have just sailed up the nearby Potomac River. Over 300 slaves on Washington's plantation are wondering if they should run to the British to obtain their freedom. They cannot discuss this out in the open, for slave informers, who hope to gain approval and special privileges, might tell the whites about any plans to escape.

Each student creates and assumes a character who is enslaved: age, gender, married or not, with or without children, with or without parents, etc. Preferably, the members within each group will be related to each other, although they can be close and trustworthy friends. Students meet in groups of two, three, or four — for the sake of secrecy, no more than that.

Things to consider:

*In 1772 a British court case, the *Sommersett* decision, determined that any slave who set foot in England could not be claimed by his master. For years, slaves at Mount Vernon have known about this.

*In 1775 the British governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, offered freedom to any slave who agreed to "join his Majesty's Troops" in the war against the Americans.

*Stories are told about slaves from nearby plantations who tried to escape at that time. Some were captured. Others were never seen again. Nobody knows for sure whether they are dead, free, or enslaved somewhere else. There are rumors that some came down with small-pox (an often fatal illness) on board crowded British ships.

*Recently, the British General Clinton has issued a proclamation, spread by word of mouth from plantation to plantation: "Every Negro who shall desert the Rebel Standard will have full security to follow within these Lines, any Occupation which he shall think proper." Clinton never actually used the word "freedom," but most slaves think that Dunmore's offer is still on.

*The master of Mount Vernon, George Washington, is Commander-in-Chief of the Continental (American) Army.

*There are stiff penalties for trying to escape. Sometimes slaves are punished not only by whipping, but by being sold away from their families. Slaves fear being sold to the West Indies, where owners are said to work their slaves to death.

*The British forces were driven from the South in 1776. Now, they seem stronger. Some patriot masters in the path of the British Army have fled their own homes, leaving their slaves to fend for themselves.

*If the British take over Mount Vernon, nobody knows whether they will free the slaves or sell them to the West Indies.

As students weigh their options, they should consider: for each possible course of action, what is the best possible outcome? The worst? How likely is each one?

Each student will decide upon his or her own course of action. Even within the group, individuals can decide differently. Those who wish to run can try to team up with students from other groups who hope to do the same, but beware: the teacher has pre-selected one slave informer from the class. If this person learns of any escape plans, the person or people trying to escape will at least be whipped, perhaps sold away.

Situation #3: Worcester, Springfield, or Plymouth Massachusetts, 1774. The British Parliament has just passed the “Massachusetts Government Act.” This act has four key provisions:

(1) It outlaws town meetings (unless approved in advance by the Crown-appointed Governor).

(2) It allows the King to appoint the 36 members of the Council, without any approval by the people. The Council functions as the upper house of the legislature, the Governor’s cabinet, and the administrative arm of provincial government.

(3) It permits the Governor to appoint all sheriffs, judges, and officials of the courts without the approval of the people.

(4) It states that Crown-appointed officials will select all jurors.

The class breaks up into three town meetings. Students choose and assume a character, but within limits: all but one should be males (widows who owned property could sometimes vote, but there were not very many). Most should be farmers. A couple in each town can be artisans or merchants. No more than one or two in each town can be wealthy. All will own at least a small amount of property.

Each town meeting should decide on a response to the Massachusetts Government Act. The rules of New England town meetings apply: The first item of business is to choose a moderator. Any speaker must be recognized by the moderator. There will be only one speaker at a time. The speaker will stand up while addressing the meeting. No person can speak more than twice on the same issue without asking permission from the rest of the meeting. Although the majority prevails, every effort is made to obtain unanimity.

Things to consider:

*The people of Worcester, Springfield, Plymouth, and every other town in Massachusetts have been holding town meetings ever since the towns were founded.

*All members of each community are used to worshipping together. The “meeting house,” where this meeting takes place, is also the church.

*According to the Charter of 1691 that has been governing the colony until now, Council members are to be chosen by the people’s elected representative, jurors are to be chosen in town meetings, and sheriffs and judges must be approved by the elected Council.

*The people of Massachusetts consider themselves to be British citizens.

*All citizens are familiar with John Locke's "social contract" theory of government, which states that governments are formed by the people for their own protection.

*When the British passed the Stamp Act and Townshend Acts, colonists boycotted British goods. Those acts were later repealed.

*The County Court will be convening in your town in three weeks. This is the first court session with judges appointed according to the new act.

*Many people in your town have recently been sued in court. If the new judges who decide on these cases turn out to be corrupt, there is no way to remove them from office.

*Two of the new council members are from your county.

*The new Governor of Massachusetts is Thomas Gage, who also serves as Commander-in-Chief of the British Army North America.

*There are 3,000 British soldiers stationed in Boston.

*95% of the population lives outside of Boston, in small towns such as yours.

What actions will your town take, if any? For each possible course of action, be sure to address how you think the British might respond, and how you might respond to their response.

Situation #4: May 25, 1780. The camp of the Continental Army, in northern New Jersey. Soldiers have not been paid for months, and once again, their rations are slim. Many have lived through the winter at Valley Forge in 1777-1778. The past winter at Morristown was harsher yet — snowbound soldiers, without a morsel of food for four days at a stretch, were forced to eat their dogs. Now it is spring, but food is still short. How long can this go on? How can they be expected to fight in such a state?

A number of privates from Connecticut are talking within their log hut. No officers are present. Students assume a specific character, stating their age, occupation (if any) before enlisting in the army, family back home, date of enlistment, and time of service remaining. They discuss their options. Should they continue to serve without complaint? Grumble amongst themselves? Register complaints with their officers? Create some kind of a fuss? Refuse to obey further orders until conditions improve? Stage a full-scale mutiny? Desert the army altogether?

Things to consider:

*These men and boys are mostly poor. Since not enough people volunteered for the army, soldiers had to be drafted instead — but if you were drafted and you had enough money, you could simply hire a substitute to serve in your place. Most soldiers were therefore men without much money or teenage boys willing to hire themselves out as substitutes.

*The Continental Congress, which employed the army and was responsible for feeding, clothing, and paying the soldiers, was notoriously broke. With no power to tax, it relied on state governments to come through with money.

*Payment to soldiers, although promised, was made only infrequently. Often, the Commissary Department did not succeed in procuring enough meat and flour to give the soldiers full daily rations. As one soldier recalled, "the monster Hunger, still attended us;

he was not to be shaken off by any efforts we could use, for here was the old story of starving, as rife as ever.”

*Back in January, 1779, soldiers from Connecticut paraded without orders and fired guns in the air to call attention to their plight. “Flattery and promising” put an end to the protest. Rations improved for a few days, but promises of better food in the future were not honored.

*There were strict punishments for desertion (thirty-nine lashes) and mutiny (possible execution).

*Many men deserted nonetheless — so many, in fact, that few were captured and punished.

*Most soldiers considered themselves intensely patriotic — more so, they felt, than their civilian countrymen.

*Some of the soldiers were due to have their terms expire at the end of the year. Others had signed up for “three years or the duration of the war.” Soldiers who had served for three years thought this meant they were done; their officers, however, maintained that they must stay for “the duration of the war,” even if that was more than three years.

*After the war Joseph Plumb Martin, one of the privates considering their options, described the soldiers’ plight at that time:

The men were now exasperated beyond endurance; they could not stand it any longer. They saw no alternative but to starve to death, or break up the army, give all up and go home. This was a hard matter for the soldiers to think upon. They were truly patriotic, they loved their country, and they had already suffered everything short of death in its cause; and now, after such extreme hardships to give up all was too much, but to starve to death was too much also. What was to be done? Here was the army starved and naked, and there their country sitting still and expecting the army to do notable things while fainting from sheer starvation.

So what would you and your comrades do? Whatever you decide, will you act collectively or individually? Remember, your own personal survival, and perhaps the fate of your country, might hang on your decision.

Debriefing: Students will want to know what the actual people decided. At the advanced levels, they can read and possibly report on the course of events by reading the appropriate sections of *People’s History* and *First American Revolution*. For younger students, the teacher can summarize, using the same resources.

Brief summaries of actual historical responses:

Situation #1: Four Iroquois nations sided with the British, two with the Americans. Most Iroquois felt the American settlers posed a greater threat to Indian lands. When one warrior, Cornplanter, counseled to remain neutral — “War is war, Death is the Death, a fight is hard Business” — another, Joseph Brant, called him a coward. This won the day, for other warriors did “not like to be called Coward men.”

Other nations were also torn apart. Young Cherokee warriors opposing the Americans split off from the rest of their nation when older Cherokee chiefs surrendered to the Americans. Delaware and Shawnee chiefs sided with the Americans, whom they

thought would win the war, but most of their people sided with the British. The stories of White Eyes, Killbuck, and Cornstalk make powerful statements. (see *People's History*).

Situation #2: Read to the class, or present as a hand-out, the list of Washington's 17 slaves who fled to the British (*People's History*, 262 cloth, 331 paperback). But note that this was only a small fraction of the total. The risks were great, even if the reward was freedom. Although the numbers are not precise (see p. 296 cloth, 374-375 paperback, and footnotes 219 and 220 to chapter 6), tens of thousands tried to escape — an exodus larger than that of the Underground Railroad years later. Most of these either perished from disease or were returned to slavery. Exactly 3,000 emigrated to freedom in Canada, where they faced harsh conditions. Those who remained on plantations faced stricter slave codes than ever before.

Situation #3: In all of Massachusetts outside of Boston, people decided to shut down the government. In Worcester, 4,622 militiamen from 37 surrounding communities lined both side of Main Street on the day the court was supposed to convene, while the Crown-appointed officials walked the gauntlet, hats in hand, reciting their resignations thirty times each so all could hear. So too in Springfield, Plymouth, and all the county seats. The people in Plymouth were so excited by what they had done that they tried to move Plymouth Rock to the center of town, but they found it too heavy.

The people also made all the Council members resign. Sometimes they visited their houses in great numbers (2,000 to Timothy Paine, 4,000 to Thomas Oliver); other times, they simply walked out of church when the Council member walked in, and that was enough to get their point across. All council members either resigned or fled behind British troops in Boston.

Not a single juror in Massachusetts agreed to sit.

The town meetings continued. The Governor could do nothing about this in most places. In the capital of Salem he arrested seven men who had called a town meeting, but he was forced to release them when 3,000 angry farmers marched on the jail.

In each of these events, the people voted at every juncture. They had no special leaders. They practiced as well as preached grassroots democracy. As one disgruntled Tory wrote in his diary, "Government has devolved upon the people, and they seem to be for using it." (For the full story, see *First American Revolution*. For a shorter treatment, see the last section in chapter 1 of *People's History*.)

Situation #4: Joseph Plumb Martin and his fellow soldiers on the Connecticut Line chose to create something of a fuss. "We had borne as long as human nature could endure, and to bear longer we considered folly," Martin wrote. One day, while on parade, the privates began "growling like soreheaded dogs, ... snapping at the officers, and acting contrary to their orders." This led to a series of events labeled the "mutiny in the Connecticut line," which did achieve some results. "Our stir did us some good in the end," Martin reported, "for we had provisions directly after."

More than one thousand soldiers on the Pennsylvania line mutinied on January 1, 1781. When they marched toward the capital at Philadelphia, authorities granted their basic demands. General Washington became worried. "Unless this dangerous spirit can be suppressed by force," he wrote to Congress, "there is an end to all subordination in the Army, and indeed to the Army itself." When soldiers from New Jersey and another group from Pennsylvania mutinied later that year, the protests were put down and some of the leaders were executed.

Immediately following the war, privates from Pennsylvania marched on Congress to demand their pay. Members of Congress fled through the back door, fearful of a military takeover — but the soldiers wanted only the money that was due to them, not political power. Veterans continued to fight for back pay and military pensions for decades. Finally, in 1818, those in need were granted pensions.

Conclusion: It is important to emphasize that what the real people chose to do represented only one of the possible responses. That’s the nature of making political decisions. Students should discuss how they made their decisions. To be realistic, they had to weigh what they wanted against what they thought might be possible. Again, this is key to political decision-making.

Conclude by repeating the basic message: everybody, not just the famous leaders, makes important political decisions that affect their own lives. That’s how our nation was founded.

Conformity with the National Standards: These lessons address at least three themes in the National Standards: Cultural Diversity; Power, Authority, and Governance; Civic Ideal and Practices. Of the disciplinary standards, they address two key components in history: they help learners obtain “knowledge of historical context in United States history,” while they also help learners “identify and analyze alternative courses of action, formulate a position or cause of action, and evaluate the implementation of that decision.” For civics, they address three key questions stipulated in the standards: “What is civic life? What is politics? What are the basic values and principles of American democracy?”

Conformity with the California Framework and Standards: History-Social Science 5.5-1; 5.6-1; 5.6-3; 5.6-4; 8.1-2; 11.1-1; 11.1-2; 12.3-1; 12.3-2.