

Name: _____

Lexington Green -- Who fired the First Shot?

(C. C. C. C. C.)

An Exercise in Sources

A primary source is:

A secondary source is:

When does a secondary source become a primary source?

Read your document with your group and answer the following questions

- 1) What is the source?
- 2) Who wrote it?
- 3) Who's perspective?
- 4) What is it saying? " "
- 5) Why or why isn't truthful?
- 6) In your document, who fired first?

Read through each of the documents.

Rank the documents.

- Which is the most reliable?
- Which document has a reason not to lie?
- What things triggered you to rank the documents in the manner you did?

Document One

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, in the County of Middle-sex. . . . do testify and declare, that on the nineteenth of April instant, about one or two o'clock in the morning, being informed that . . . a body of regulars were marching from Boston towards Concord, . . . we were alarmed and having met at the place of our company's parade [Lexington Green], were dismissed by our Captain, John Parker, for the present, with orders to be ready to attend at the beat of the drum, we further testify and declare, that about five o'clock in the morning, hearing our drum beat, we proceeded towards the parade, and soon found that a large body of troops were marching towards us, some of our company were coming up to the parade, and others had reached it, at which time the company began to disperse, whilst our backs were turned on the troops, we were fired on by them, and a number of our men were instantly killed and wounded, not a gun was fired by any person in our company on the regulars to our knowledge before they fired on us, and they continued firing until we had all made our escape.

Lexington, April 25, 1775. Nathaniel Mulliken, Philip Russell, [and the other 32 men] [Duly sworn to by 34 minutemen on April 25 before three justices of the peace] (Document reprinted in Sawtell, 1968)

Document 2

Major Pitcairn screamed at us: "Lay down your arms, you lousy bastards! Disperse, you lousy peasant scum!" . . . At least, those were the words that I seem to remember. Others remembered differently; but the way he screamed in his strange London accent, with the motion and excitement, with his horse rearing and kicking . . . with the drums beating again and the fixed bayonets glittering in the sunshine, it's a wonder that any of his words remain with us. . . . We still stood in our two lines, our guns butt end on the ground or held loosely in our hands. Major Pitcairn spurred his horse and raced between the lines. Somewhere, away from us, a shot sounded. A redcoat soldier raised his musket, leveled it at Father, and fired. My father clutched at his breast, then crumpled to the ground like an empty sack. . . . Then the whole British front burst into a roar of sound and flame and smoke.

Excerpt from the novel April Morning, by Howard Fast, published in 1961

Document 3

19th. At 2 o'clock we began our march by wading through a very long ford up to our middles; after going a few miles we took three or four people who were going off to give intelligence; about five miles on this side of a town called Lexington, which lay in our road, we heard there were some hundreds of people collected together intending to oppose us and stop our going on; 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; but on our coming near them they fired one or two shots, upon which our men without any orders rushed in upon them, fired and put them to flight; several of them were killed, we could not tell how many, because they were got behind walls and into the woods; We had a man of the 10th light Infantry wounded, nobody else hurt. We then formed on the Common, but with some difficulty, the men were so wild that they could hear no orders; we waited a considerable time there and at length proceeded on our way to Concord.

Entry for April 19th, 1775 from the diary of Lieutenant John Barker, an officer in the British army. (Document reprinted in Dana, 1877)

Document 4

In April 1775, General Gage, the military governor of Massachusetts, sent out a body of troops to take possession of military stores at Concord, a short distance from Boston. At Lexington, a handful of "embattled farmers," who had been tipped off by Paul Revere, barred the way. The "rebels" were ordered to disperse. They stood their ground. The English fired a volley of shots that killed eight patriots. It was not long before the swift-riding Paul Revere spread the news of this new atrocity to the neighboring colonies. The patriots of all of New England, although still a handful, were now ready to fight the English.

From The United States: Story of a Free People, a high school textbook by Samuel Steinberg, Allyn and Bacon, publishers 1963.

Document 5

There is a certain sliding over and indeterminateness in describing the beginning of the firing. Major Pitcairn who was a good man in a bad cause, insisted upon it to the day of his death (that the colonists fired first). . . He does not say that he saw the colonists fire first. Had he said it, I would have believed him, being a man of integrity and honor. He expressly says he did not see who fired first; and yet believed the peasants began. His account is this - that riding up to them he ordered them to disperse; which they not doing instantly; he turned about to order his troops so to draw out as to surround and disarm them. As he turned he saw a gun in a peasant's hand from behind a wall, flash in the pan without going off and instantly or very soon two or three guns went off by which he found his horse wounded and also a man near him wounded. These guns he did not see, but believing they could not come from his own people, doubted not and so asserted that they came from our people; and that thus they began the attack. The impetuosity of the King's Troops were such that a promiscuous, uncommanded but general fire took place, which Pitcairn could not prevent; though he struck his staff or sword downwards with all earnestness as a signal to forbear or cease firing. This account Major Pitcairn himself gave Mr. Brown of Providence who was seized with flour and carried to Boston a few days after the battle; and Gov. Sessions told it to me.

From the diary of Ezra Stiles, president of Yale College, entry for August 21, 1775. (Document reprinted in Dexter, 1901)

Document 6

I think it proper to observe, that when I had got some miles on the march from Boston, I detached six light infantry companies to march with all expedition to seize the two ridges on different roads beyond Concord. On these companies' arrival at Lexington, I understand from the report of Major Pitcairn, who was with them, and from many officers, that they found on the green close to the road a body of the country people drawn up in military order, with arms and accoutrements, and as appeared after, loaded; and that they posted some men in a dwelling and the Meeting-house. Our troops advanced towards them, without any intention of injuring them, further than to inquire the reason of their being thus assembled, and if not satisfactory, to have secured their arms; but they, in confusion, went off, principally to the left, only one of them fired before he went off, and three or four more jumped over the wall and fired from behind it among the soldiers; on which the troops returned it, and killed several of them. They likewise fired on the soldiers from the Meeting and dwelling-houses. . . . Rather earlier than this, on the road, a countryman from behind a wall had snapped his piece at Lieutenants Adair and Surtherland, but it flashed and did not go off. After this we we saw some in the woods, but marched on to Concord without anything further happening.

Report of Lieutenant-Colonel Francis Smith of the 10th Foot to Governor Gage April 22, 1775. In Commanger, Documents of American History, 1958.

i **Relic** An object such as a bit of clothing, a bone, hair or a personal possession that belonged to a holy person who is dead. In the Middle Ages people believed that relics had special powers and used them as charms.

SOURCE 10

Foul as it is, Hell itself is defiled [polluted] by the fouler presence of King John . . . His punishments were refinements of cruelty – starvation of children, the crushing of old men under copes [long pieces] of lead . . . He scoffed [laughed] at priests and turned his back on the mass, even amidst the solemnities of his coronation, but he never stirred on a journey without hanging relics round his neck.

J.R. Green, *Short History of the English People*, 1875

SOURCE 11

He was a great prince but hardly a happy one, and he experienced the ups and downs of fortune. He would have thought himself as happy and successful as he could have wished, had he not lost his continental possessions and suffered the Church's curse [excommunication].

Barnwell Chronicle, late 1220's

SOURCE 12

John sat as a judge. His lively mind and keen intelligence played upon the cases brought before him . . . No king of England was ever so unlucky . . . From the moment when France came into the strong hands of Philip II his conquest of Normandy was only a matter of time . . .

D.M. Stenton, *English Society in the Early Middle Ages*, 1951

SOURCE 13

John was a tyrant not a king, a destroyer instead of a governor, crushing his own people and favouring aliens [foreigners], a lion to his own people but a lamb to foreigners and rebels. He had lost the duchy of Normandy and many other territories though sloth [extreme laziness]. As for Christianity he was unstable and unfaithful . . . Foul as it is, Hell itself is defiled by the fouler presence of King John.

Matthew Paris, *Greater Chronicle*, 1235

Matthew Paris based what he said about John on another book, *The Flowers of History* by Roger of Wendover. Matthew took over from Roger as historian at St Albans monastery in 1235. The historian, W.L. Warren, shows that Roger is not always reliable:

SOURCE 14

Roger of Wendover writes that in 1209 a royal servant, Geoffrey the archdeacon of Norwich . . . held that it was not safe for men in holy orders to serve the king . . . this reached John who, in a fury, sent Sir William Talbot to arrest him. He was imprisoned in chains . . . and deprived of food, so that . . . he died an agonising death. There is undoubtedly something wrong with this story for Geoffrey the archdeacon of Norwich, so far from dying in 1209, became bishop of Ely in 1225.

W.L. Warren, *King John*, 1961

activity

1 Look at sources 10–13.

a Which sources were written when John was alive or just after his death and which were written some time after his death?

b Which sources are very hostile to John and which give a more balanced view?

c How have historians' opinions about King John changed since 1200?

2 Look at sources 10 and 11. Make a list of the different points of view that these writers hold about King John.

3 Look at sources 12 and 13. a Make a list of the different points of view that these two historians hold about King John.

b Which historian used source 10 and which used source 11?

4a Look at source 14. How does W. L. Warren show there is something wrong with Roger of Wendover's story?

b What does that tell you about sources 10 and 13?

Some Notes on Historical Evidence

Adapted from Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History A: Primer of Historical Method*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1963, p.p. 149-171

To some extent, historians use the same tests for historical evidence that law courts use for legal evidence. But law courts may rule some evidence outside the legal rules (i.e. hearsay evidence) and refuse to take it into account. Historians, however, make take any evidence into account but they subject it to certain tests to determine its reliability. Here are some:

1. Was the witness able to tell the truth?

- ❖ How near to the event (in time and space) is the witness?
- ❖ Does the witness have any background that makes him an expert in the field or is the witness simply an "ordinary" person?
- ❖ How much attention was the witness able to pay to the event?
- ❖ Is there something about the background of the witness that would affect his point of view? *who's truth is it*
- ❖ Is the witness egocentric? Is the witness unconsciously trying to make himself more (or less) important than he really was? *observer's sense of self importance*

2. Is the witness willing to tell the truth?

- ❖ Does the witness have something to be gained from pushing a particular point of view? *conflict of interest*
- ❖ Does he have a religious, political, or ideological axe to grind?
- ❖ It may be important to consider the intended reader of a document. Does the witness *audience* hope to please or displease a king, a general, a president with his testimony?
- ❖ Is the evidence of the witness full of amusing anecdotes? Do you suspect that accuracy has been sacrificed to tell a good story? *embellishments*
- ❖ Testimony full of exact quotations should be suspect unless the witness had some way of recording words accurately.
- ❖ Do you suspect that the witness has used self-censorship to avoid legal troubles from people still living? Has he avoided telling the whole story for reasons of "good taste?" *risk to telling the truth*
- ❖ If the document has a date on it, how do you know the date is accurate? Is there evidence that the witness predated or postdated the document? Why?

3. What conditions favour credibility in a witness?

- ❖ If the witness seems not to care about outcome of the event in his observations and conclusions he is likely to be unbiased. *objective*
- ❖ If the witness avoids words that are dramatic he is likely to be unbiased.
- ❖ If a witness makes a statement that is harmful to himself, his loved ones, his friends, his beliefs, it is likely to be the truth.
- ❖ Some facts may be so well known (or so easily checked) that a witness is unlikely to be mistaken or lie. Be careful, though.

4. Is the evidence of a witness corroborated by other evidence?

- ❖ The other evidence should be independent. Two witnesses may agree on an event simply because one has copied the other. *corroboration*
- ❖ A witness may tell us about how he says he felt about an event but what do his actions say?
- ❖ Do his actions make what he says he thought about the event more or less believable? If he says one thing but does another, his testimony is not creditable.

*Independence
does it make any sense*