

Chapter 1

An Introduction to the Study of History

The study of history is the search for the answers to four basic questions:

- What were the conditions at the time?
- What happened?
- Who was right?
- Why did it happen?

On the morning of April 19, 1775, about six-dozen Massachusetts farmers stood on the Lexington town green. They had been warned by Paul Revere that a far larger number of British soldiers were marching to Lexington and Concord to capture Sam Adams and John Hancock and to destroy military supplies. When the British army arrived in Lexington, the two forces stood for several minutes in tense confrontation. Suddenly, a shot rang out from an unknown source, and instantly, the British opened fire. Retreating in hasty confusion, the colonists left behind eight men, dead or dying, on the village green. Thus, with this incident, which neither side expected or willed, the American Revolution began.

A Search for Answers

The battle of Lexington raises most of the important questions that students of its history should ask and try to answer. Even before beginning to sort through the various accounts of the battle, you would need to know the conditions at the time that paved the way for this event. You should know that the British had restricted the colonists' trade, were forbidding town meetings, and were viewed by many colonists as tyrants who were depriving Americans of their natural born rights. Such were the significant economic, political, and ideological factors in 1775 that gave rise to what happened in Lexington that April morning.

Secondly, you would want to learn what actually happened on the Lexington Green. There are scores of different accounts, many disagreeing over such essential facts as the time of the battle, the source of the first shot, the number of men involved, and the orders given by the commanders. To formulate your own answer to the question "what happened?" you must read and analyze all these varied accounts.

Contradictory versions of the battle of Lexington circulated in the colonies and in England. Each was slanted to favor one side or the other. The British account portrayed the colonists as rebels defying lawful orders and opening fire on the King's army. The colonists claimed they were merely defending their homes and liberties, and they insisted that the British fired the first shot. Each side, in other words, justified its own actions and blamed the other for firing first. Even 200 years after the event, the question "who was right?" has not been answered to the satisfaction of all historians.

The final question, "why did it happen?" is also very controversial. Events have both causes in the economic competition between merchant businessmen in the New and Old Worlds. Both groups are portrayed by economic historians as competing for control over furs, lumber, slaves, shipping and manufacturing. Social historians, on the other hand, see the underlying causes of events in the struggle between social classes, while other historians seek the causes of events in the different ideas and mind-

sets among competing groups. In this way the student of history is presented with political, economic, social, and ideological explanations for the American Revolution.

The questions, "what were the conditions?", "what happened?", "who was right?", and, "why did it happen?" are as important to understanding the present as they are to understanding the past. Historians will search for answers in the political, economic, social, and ideological conditions of the time and come up with different answers stressing one or another of these factors. Thus, the four types of questions that have been raised will be posed as long as there are people interested in human behavior.

This unit on the American Revolution raises the four questions that have just been highlighted. While there will be a great deal of factual information to help you answer them, the emphasis will be less on the answers you arrive at than on the facts and logic you use to support them. The questions posed here about the American Revolution are bound to raise a great number of disagreements. This should encourage each of you to think more deeply and search somewhat harder. Thinking and searching for one's own answers, rather than memorizing the conclusions of others, will cast you in the role of historian

Suggested Student Exercises

1. Define or identify and briefly show the importance to the chapter of each of the following:

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| a. the 4 kinds of questions historians ask | d. intellectual history | h. underlying causes |
| b. social history | e. primary sources | i. first shot |
| c. economic history | f. secondary sources | j. Battle of Lexington |
| | g. immediate causes | |

2. Give examples of the political, economic, social, and ideological factors that may have been said to have brought about the battle of Lexington.