New Seats at the Tea Party

On a warm autumn day in Northern Virginia, a dozen girls enter their all-girls high school's eleventh grade U.S. History classroom; about half are boarders and half are day students commuting from the greater DC area. They're Black, brown, and white, several are international students, and all are prepared for class.

Their assignment is to play the role of an early American woman, pre-assigned and carefully researched. I gathered and provided sources from the websites of the Museum of the American Revolution, National Women's History Museum, National Park Service, and state historical societies, among others. These websites are easy to link to on the learning platform Canvas and are also written accessibly for high school students. Soon my students sit at their desks, notes and hot tea in hand. I prepare to take notes using a rubric. We enter vast early America via an early American women's tea party.

Figure 1: A Society of Patriotic Ladies at Edenton in North Carolina, 1775. British Museum, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

When facilitated responsibly, historical role-play can be an invaluable educational method because it encourages empathy and taking ownership of one's participation in the classroom. Historical role-play enables students to imagine themselves in the role of historical actors, envisioning issues that faced them from a first-person perspective.

Creating a Space for Nuance, Complexity, and Representation

Before the pandemic and before my time at the institution, our American Revolution unit featured a role-play simulation where classes spent two days on the Boston Tea Party, adapted from the Old North Church's simulation of the Sons of Liberty. Each girl role-played a white man, and they debated independence. The sides of the discussion were Patriots seeking independence versus Tories loyal to King George III. Students gained an understanding of the unfair taxes that helped motivate revolution, and they learned surface-level arguments for and against independence. Since my colleagues, students, and I always worry about finding enough time to cover a wide range of diverse perspectives, this academic year the senior U.S. History teacher encouraged me to adapt the early American historical role-playing simulation from the Boston Tea Party into something new.
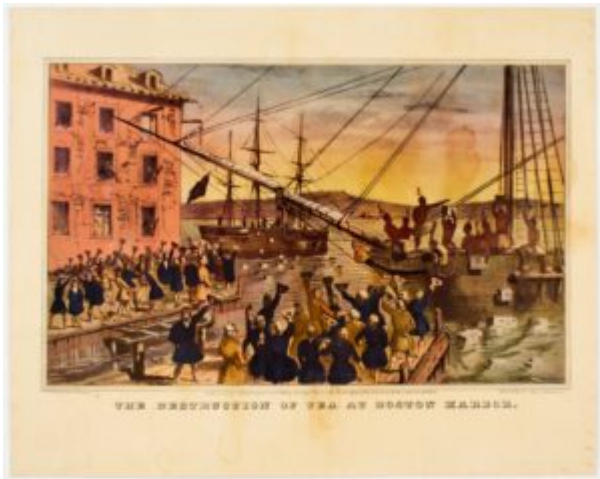
Figure 2: Nathaniel Currier, *The Destruction of the Tea at Boston Harbor* (New York: N. Currier, 1846). *Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society*.

I created an early American women's tea party where students role-play from a diverse list of Revolutionary-era women. For each woman, I provided one secondary source and one primary source. For example, for Abigail Adams I provided a biographical webpage from FirstLadies.org and her "Remember the Ladies" letter to her husband, digitized by Massachusetts Historical Society. For Phillis Wheatley, I provided a biographical webpage from the National Women's History Museum and Wheatley's poem on tyranny and slavery in the colonies from 1772. The assigned topic of discussion remained independence, and we also considered how American independence affected an ideologically and racially diverse group of women.

Figure 3: Abigail Adams. Gilbert Stuart, Abigail Smith Adams, 1800-1815. *[Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington](#)*.

White Patriots included Abigail Adams, Margaret Corbin, Mary Katherine Goddard, Mercy Otis Warren, Hannah Winthrop, and Penelope Barker. Penelope Barker

spearheaded North Carolina's equivalent of the Boston Tea Party. White Loyalists included Mary Dowd and to a limited extent Theodosia Burr. African Americans included Phillis Wheatley, Peggy Gwynn, Elizabeth Freeman, and Margaret Thomas. Native Americans included Konwatsi'tsiaienni, also known as Molly Brant, and Madam Sacho.

Figure 4: Penelope Barker, Unknown author, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Figure 5: Elizabeth Freeman. Mum Bett, aka Elizabeth Freeman, painted by Susan Ridley Sedgwick. Susan Anne Ridley Sedgwick, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

The assignment asked participants to write out answers to the following questions in preparation for the simulation:

First, what is the name of your assigned role, and what is her position in

British colonial society?

Second, what are your role's interests in supporting/opposing America's move to independence and nationhood in 1776? How does this person stand to benefit or lose from a separation from Great Britain? For those of you whose roles are women who were more active during the war then before, try to project back from their experiences to what they might be concerned about at the war's onset? How might they anticipate the advantages or challenges that emerged during their life?

Third, what are the broader interests for the British colonies in building a new nation? Or why might it be better to stay part of the British empire?

Fourth, what would be an acceptable outcome to the crisis for your role? What would your role like to happen?

The early American women's tea party assignment enables learning outcomes that the previous Boston Tea Party had prevented. The girls learn that Black, Indigenous, and white early American women played integral roles in politics and society. Including Black and Indigenous women's perspectives illuminates the lives of people in early America for whom American independence was not beneficial. Thus, these diverse experiences matter for shaping historical narratives. For instance, Black women did not all either oppose or support independence. Due to the realities of either enslavement or emancipation, early American Black women's interests were highly nuanced. Neither white colonists nor white Britons intended to aid African Americans substantially. These dynamics add scholarly sophistication to the classroom.

I facilitated this simulation twice during the 2021-2022 academic year and watched my colleague facilitate a third. Whenever possible, my colleague and I both let students choose their parts, hoping that this approach would enable agency and empowerment.

In one of my simulations, Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren passed notes across the room. The notes, which I was still finding days later, didn't have real words on them, just scribbled lines. They used the resources that I provided from Massachusetts Historical Society's online primary sources to discern that Adams and Warren were friends in real life. As material culture, the notes suggested the girls' enthusiasm for this activity.

Figure 6: Mercy Otis Warren, circa 1763. John Singleton Copley, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

The previous Boston Tea Party simulation likely made independence seem more automatic by presenting a traditional narrative. The early American women's tea party, however, frames independence as not inevitable and not even necessarily as a good idea. For example, in one of my classes, Mercy Otis Warren relayed a story about how a British Loyalist physically beat up her brother. She rambled on about it. After a long pause, a Mexican exchange student playing Loyalist white woman Mary Dowd quipped, "What did he do?" The room erupted in appreciative laughter. Essentially, rather than assuming that the beat-up Patriot was an aggrieved victim as the American colonists often perceived themselves, this student conveyed the possibility that maybe the British aggressor had valid motives. Beneath the laughter lay an understanding that the Patriot did not have to be in the right. This signified a new way of thinking. We were questioning the assumptions built into national mythmaking regarding the inevitability and even righteousness of American independence.

The four Black women historical figures are Phillis Wheatley, who was enslaved; Peggy Gwynn, who self-emancipated in part thanks to British efforts but returned to enslavement after the war; Elizabeth Freeman, who filed a lawsuit to win her freedom in Massachusetts in 1781; and Margaret Thomas, who was a free Black woman working in Valley Forge. Through the role-play, students absorb that while all enslaved people sought freedom, some were more likely to receive it from Americans and others from the British, suggesting that neither American nor British empires protected the interests of African Americans. Neither independence nor Loyalism promised their rights.

Figure 7: Phillis Wheatley. Pendleton's Lithography, *Phillis Wheatley* (Boston: s.n., 1834). *Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society*.

While some students feel less inclined to participate in daily classroom discussions, and in graded ones they might participate only for the sake of their grade, some students comment that role-play can be less intimidating than sharing their own opinions. Indeed, most students participate repeatedly throughout the simulation. A few speak only once or twice. Even if a student elects not to speak, the written component would protect their grade, and at minimum they would be treated to lively historical nuances unfolding around them.

Navigating Historical Trauma

The early American women's tea party comes with at least one serious challenge: how can educators use role-play to teach vast early America and incorporate diverse voices without retraumatizing students of color? What if a white student role-plays as a Black person? What if a Black student role-plays as an enslaved person? The first time that I facilitated this new activity, for example, a white student playing Phillis Wheatley repeatedly debated a Black student playing Mercy Otis Warren. The Black student found herself representing a white woman, ill-equipped to advocate for African Americans within the setting. I messed up here. After recapping as a class, however, I dare presume that everyone directly involved ended up feeling okay. I learned a significant amount, too, and with subsequent simulations I initiated transparent discussions about problems that might arise. Due to the traumatic nature of history itself, the risk of retraumatizing already marginalized students looms over role-play.

Before I facilitated the simulation a second time, I inquired what problems my students foresaw. My students are brilliant, compassionate, and thoughtful. In many cases their insights stem from their own diverse geographical and racial backgrounds. I never received pushback about doing a role-play exercise likely

due to a combination of the lead U.S. History teacher's previous experience with them, my students being driven to follow instructions and earn top grades, and the sense of trust that I built with them over time. After I explained the assignment and before we decided who would play each part, I facilitated a discussion that took seriously the possibility of reproducing historical trauma. Further, asking students what problems they anticipate seems more effective and empowering than telling them. I ask them what could go wrong. For example, a Black student might consider whether they want to take on the perspective of a white Patriot who might be complicit in enslavement, an enslaved person, a British Loyalist, or an Indigenous person before they choose. Having many options helps. One student told me afterward that acknowledging and discussing potential problems beforehand was helpful for making an opportunity for learning rather than miscommunication. Considering these dynamics before they unfold is a best practice.

Yet, responding to my question about possible challenges, one student asked whether we might miss out on the important perspectives of the "Founding Fathers." To the contrary, these pedagogical decisions aim in part to combat dominant narratives about the almighty white male Founders. The question of independence signified much more than a discussion between Loyalists and Patriots. The higher goals of representation and nuance were worth the challenges that accompany integrating diverse voices.

Figure 8: N. Currier, *The Women of '76: "Molly Pitcher" the Heroine of Monmouth* (New York: N. Currier, 1850). *Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society*.

Historical narratives consist of more than a few people in the same place at one time carrying out actions. Students understand that these early American women were never all in the same room together at the same time. Some were more active in the years leading up to the American Revolution, while others were more active during the war. The early American women hailed from Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, both Carolinas, and elsewhere. A few were

enslaved and not free to travel on their own. The challenges of communicating across geographies, perspectives, and time reinforce the fact that those historical narratives and perspectives are complicated and not linear.

Figure 9: *Liberty Triumphant, or, The Downfall of Oppression* (Philadelphia: Henry Dawkins, 1774). *Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society*.

Although the course of history is not necessarily decided in a room of teenage girls sipping tea beneath their KN-95 masks, neither is it determined by a singular mob of white colonists (or colonizers) appropriating a Mohawk identity while throwing tea from a ship into the sea. Only the former dispels myths and resists homogeneity. The early American women's tea party creates a space for nuance, complexity, and representation. After all: no taxation without representation.

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Further Reading

For reasons why many enslaved Africans, Loyalists, Native Americans opposed American independence, see Kathleen DuVal, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 2016).

For a condensed history of the role of racism in declaring American independence, see Robert Parkinson, *Thirteen Clocks: How Race United the Colonies and Made the Declaration of Independence* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

For the importance of centering Black and Indigenous perspectives when teaching vast early America, see Karin Wulf, "Why the history of vast early America

[matters today](#)," *Aeon* (15 July 2021).

For best practices for historical role-play in the classroom, see "[How to — and How Not to — Teach Role Plays](#)," *Zinn Education Project* (15 September 2019).

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