

Using 1776



Teaching the Declaration of Independence through the musical comedy

Sherman Edwards and Peter Stone's 1972 movie musical *1776* has been a natural fit in middle-school classrooms for several years. Every time I conduct a professional-development session, teachers tell me about planning several class periods each year so their students can view the film version of the Broadway musical. They speak of the activities they've had their students complete after watching the film—everything from writing biographies of the delegates to reenacting the Congress to rewriting sections of the musical and performing it for their fellow students. While these teachers often mention the need for these special projects (even after taking several class periods to watch the entire film) they are keenly aware of the many days of instructional time consumed by this use of *1776*.

The American Musicals Project (AMP) at the New-York Historical Society has developed a curriculum unit to incorporate the musical in a different way. Rather than screening the entire film, AMP lessons focus on using small sections of the musical in class. These clips, which are single songs or specific scenes from *1776*, range from two minutes to ten or twelve minutes. Clips are chosen because they strongly support the teaching of sections of the social studies and English language arts curriculum. Most importantly, all AMP lessons also incorporate the use of primary-source materials into student work with the musical. An array of materials is included—maps, broadsides, portraits, advertisements—along with questions to guide student observation.

But why use the musical *1776*? Why not stick with the textbook and maybe add a few primary-source documents? Why take class time even to show segments from a film? To start out simply, the music reaches students in a way that written material does not. The music, when used in the film clips and combined with primary-source materials and libretto excerpts, can reach all types of learners in a classroom, especially those who fade away from more traditional methods of teaching. Teachers are often reluctant to introduce a film musical from the 1970s into a classroom full of seventh graders in 2006, fearing that students will reject it because it's not the pop or hip-hop music to which they typically listen. However, while students may giggle when the first clip begins, they really do listen to and enjoy the music. Many of them will leave class singing the songs or beg to see the rest of the film. Their interest is piqued, and the things they see and hear tend to stay with them.

The visual aspect of the musical is also important. Using a clip from *1776* in a classroom can provide students with a vivid connection to a time period that may seem distant and often uninteresting to them. Rather than reading about John Adams in a text book or looking at a flat portrait of him, students can

experience an actor bringing the character to life when they view the “Sit Down, John” segment. They see his clothing, watch his mannerisms, hear his voice, and note his mounting frustration with delegates who do not support the plan that he so passionately presents. When students view the film, John Adams is no longer just another name in a history text. He becomes a human being with strengths, hope, flaws, and passion.



Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser. Broadside (October 31, 1765). Courtesy of the collection of the New-York Historical Society. Click on this image for a PDF download.

Using clips from 1776 also helps students see the complexities involved in major political change. It's no secret that the Congress did declare independence and that the new nation was the victor in its war against Great Britain. It is often difficult, though, for students to grasp the challenges, uncertainties, dangers, and new responsibilities that came with independence. When they watch clips from 1776, students hear about the fear of British spies. They watch delegates debate the grievances of the individual colonies. They hear about the troublesome issues of slavery and trade, and they watch delegates grapple with the decision to remove the slavery section from the Declaration of Independence. Once they understand the issue of independence more fully, they are then able to think more critically about the process of creating the Declaration of Independence.

Incorporating 1776 into classroom lessons also helps students become active, savvy media viewers. Students watch television and films all the time. They come home from school, plopping down on the couch, and turn on MTV. They do their homework with a football game blaring in the background. They go to the movies and see the latest action film, passively letting the images wash over them. Far too often students don't know how to really read those images and analyze their meaning. They don't know how to question the truthfulness or accuracy of what they are seeing and hearing.

With “Sit Down, John,” to take just one number from the musical, the classroom teacher can begin to encourage students to move from passive to active viewers. She or he can help them recognize and interpret the historical images and

objects they see—men in strange clothing, quill pens and candlesticks on the desk. Adams’s opening monologue about independence can be used as a way for students to analyze what his words and action tell us about his character. When the delegates finally sign the declaration, students can turn to primary-source documents to investigate the accuracy of the portrayal of this event.



“Glorious News.” Broadside repealing the Stamp Act. Courtesy of the collection of the New-York Historical Society. Click on this image for a PDF download.

Above everything else, the music and the performances of 1776 are emotionally engaging. Students enjoy watching the segments, and the arts can be a powerful tool to motivate students to learn about history. Some songs and scenes make them laugh, others make them angry, but the drama of all of the segments draws them into history. They become engaged in the country’s struggle for independence and involved in the debates about religion and tyranny and liberty and safety. When students feel invested in these issues, which are just as relevant now as they were in 1776, they become better citizens.

The following is an excerpt from an AMP lesson using a clip from 1776 and primary-source documents from the collection of the New-York Historical Society. (You can obtain a copy of 1776 from your local DVD retailer and/or rental service, and the primary sources can be downloaded from the New-York Historical Society’s site by clicking on the images on this page.) Sample questions and activities are included to assist teachers who would like to try this kind of work in their classroom.

1776: an excerpt from a lesson, using video clips and primary-source documents

The opening scene from the film of 1776, which takes place in the bell tower,

and the first song, "Sit Down, John," can be used to help students create a visual picture of the time period for themselves, explore John Adams as a character, and understand some of the events that led to the Declaration of Independence.

First, view the clip with the class. There is a lot of information there, and it may be useful to show the clip several times, focusing each time on a different aspect of the scene. Provide students with focus questions before viewing the clip, and discuss the questions after viewing.

- Describe the setting of this scene (time, place, conditions). Where are the delegates? How are people dressed? What are some of the differences between 1776 and today? What are some of the similarities? What do these things say about life in 1776?
- Focus on John Adams, his appearance, his statements, and his actions. Describe John Adams's clothes. What do they say about his social class and status? Choose three adjectives to describe John Adams's personality. Why did you choose those words? Do you like John Adams? Why or why not? Do you think this is an accurate portrayal of John Adams? Where might you go to find more information?
- What is the conflict between John Adams and the rest of the Congress? What does Adams want the Congress to do? Look closely at his opening monologue. What reasons does Adams have for calling for this strong measure? How does the Congress feel about Adams's point of view? What do they want him to do? Why won't they open up a window? How does Adams react to the Congress?

After viewing the clip from 1776, use primary-source documents to deepen students' historical investigation. Three sources are provided here.

In his opening monologue, Adams refers to the Stamp Act. Use the *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser* from October 31, 1765, and "Glorious News" (the repeal of the Stamp Act) to learn more about how people felt about this act.

Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser

- How much time was there between the publication of this broadside and the start date of the Stamp Act?
- Who published the broadside?
- Why did he publish it?
- How does he describe the times?
- What images does he use for the stamp?
- What is the meaning of this image?
- What connection does he make between the Stamp Act and slavery?
- What is he hoping will happen to the Stamp Act?
- What is he asking of his subscribers?
- In what ways is the broadside like a tombstone?
- Look closely at the language used in the broadside. Why did the author choose to use these specific words and phrases?

“Glorious News”

- What is this broadside announcing?
- Where was the news originally printed?
- Where was the broadside printed?
- How did the printer receive the news?
- How long did it take for the printer to receive the news?
- Look at the second paragraph starting “An ACT to REPEAL . . . ” What does it say that the original act was meant to do?
- Look at the fifth paragraph starting “Yesterday morning . . . ” Why do you think the North American merchants paid a visit to “his Majesty”?
- How else did people respond to the news?

In the song “Sit Down, John” the Congress does not react positively to Adams’s call to discuss independence from Great Britain. On several occasions they sing about not opening the windows, which is because they are afraid of people hearing their discussions. Use “Proclamation! For Suppressing REBELLION and SEDITION” to learn more about this danger.



“Proclamation! For Suppressing Rebellion and Sedition.” Broadside. Courtesy of the collection of the New-York Historical Society. Click on this image for a PDF download.

“Proclamation! For Suppressing REBELLION and SEDITION”

- What is rebellion and sedition?
- Who are “our Subjects?”
- What are “ill designing men” doing to them?
- What power has “protected and sustained them”?
- What “disorderly acts” have the people committed?
- Who has “promoted and encouraged” this rebellion?

- Why is this royal proclamation being issued?
- What is the proclamation declaring?
- What are people being commanded to do about the rebellion?
- Who do you think was making this proclamation?
- What is the significance of the last line of the proclamation?

After using the 1776 clip and primary sources to begin to understand these issues, continue to explore these topics through writing activities:

- Create a character study of John Adams, based on the film as well as additional research. Take on the role of Adams and write a letter to Abigail summarizing the events and arguments of the day. How does he feel about the discussion with the Congress? Why does he feel this way?
- Using the *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser* as an example, write a broadside that reports on today's events in Congress. Be sure to include the following: setting, conflict, people involved, headline, location, and date. Add illustrations to the broadside to help make the point of view clear.
- Using "Glorious News," write a journal entry from the perspective of Jonathan Lowder or Thomas Brackett. How do they feel about the repeal of the Stamp Act? How do they feel about King George? As an additional activity, investigate the British point of view more closely. Write a journal entry from the point of view of King George. What is his perspective on the colonists and the repeal of the act?

For more information about the American Musicals Project and these and other materials, contact the N-YHS at 212-485-9276 or visit www.nyhistory.org and www.americanmusicalsproject.org.

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