The Non-Importation Movement

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**Grade Level:** Upper Elementary  
**Duration of lesson:** 2-3 periods  
**Overview:**

This lesson examines the boycott of British imports by American colonists made in protest of the taxes placed on goods, known as the Non-Importation Movement of 1765-1770. Because of the boycott, substitutions needed to be made for the proscribed items. Students will examine a colonial newspaper advertisement from the *Maryland Gazette* to learn about the types of goods imported and used by the colonists, and will consider appropriate substitutions for these items. Additionally, the Non-Importation Movement had an effect on women because the burden of producing these substituted goods fell on them. Students will discuss what impact the movement had on the daily lives of colonial women.

**Related National History Standards:**

**Content Standards:**

**Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation (1754 – 1820’s)**

**Standard 1:** The causes of the American Revolution, the ideas and interests involved in forging the revolutionary movement, and the reasons for the American victory

**Standard 2:** The impact of the American Revolution on politics, economy, and society

**Historical Thinking Standards:**

**Standard 2: Historical Comprehension**  
G. Draw upon data in historical maps  
H. Utilize visual, mathematical and quantitative data

**Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation**  
C. Analyze cause-and-effect relationships and multiple causation, including the importance of the individual, the influence of ideas.

**Standard 5: Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making**  
A. Identify issues and problems in the past.  
E. Formulate a position or course of action on an issue.

**Lesson Objectives:**
- Students will analyze a primary source document to determine appropriate colonial substitutions for British goods.
- Students will evaluate colonial perspectives of the Non-Importation Movement.
- Students will discuss women’s unique roles in the Non-Importation movement.

**Topic Background:**

Following Britain’s Sugar Act of 1764 and the Stamp Act of 1765, a non-importation movement evolved when the American colonists boycotted British goods in an effort to change imperial policy. The plan was based on the belief that British merchants would apply pressure on Parliament to repeal unpopular laws if they were being hurt economically. This system effected people from small towns farther inland, who had not previously been involved in the “imperial controversy.” More importantly, it had large repercussions for colonial women, as they now had to produce goods they had never made before or had to learn to do without. This meant that some began to weave their own cloth and others had to give up some of the luxury items they had previously enjoyed. This boycott, in which women were instrumental, proved costly to the British (Longman, 2003; Raphael, 2001).

At first, free women as well as men, signed agreements to boycott a long list of goods manufactured in England. Next, the decision was made to abstain from purchasing or consuming imported tea. Women substituted by using goldenrod, blackberry or raspberry leaves, sage and various other herbs for tea. By signing such agreements and abiding by them, women in effect claimed a political role for themselves, and posited themselves as patriots with a stake in politics and the public interest. In serving or not serving tea, women were making political statements (Raphael, 2001).

Consumer boycotts not only raised women’s political consciousness, they also created a lot of work for women. Most colonial women worked hard at many tasks. They grew vegetables, raised and slaughtered fowl, tended to the fires, cooked meals, washed and mended clothes, produced soap and candles in their homes, took care of their families, both young and old, and now they had to add more to this list of expectations by working hard at new tasks, such as producing cloth and clothing. The production of cloth was a particular concern as it altered the lives of women in a profound way (Created Equal, 2003; Ulrich, 1998).

Cloth, needed for protection against the weather and the environment, was made into breeches, coats, shirts, hats, handkerchiefs, petticoats, gowns, cloaks and bonnets, and used in the household in aprons, bed linens and towels. Even farmers needed cloth products for “agricultural operations,” such as grain sacks and wagon covers, among other things. The process of making cloth required raw materials, proper tools and skilled hands. While the cloth the women produced was very plain and coarse, wearing it became a political statement. It had been customary for upper class women to wear fine clothing made of silk or satin, but during this time of non-importation, even some of them chose to wear the coarse hand-made American cloth. It became patriotic to use the spinning wheel and to wear “homespun” (Created Equal, 2003; Holliday, 1922; Hood, 1996).
The actual practice of making homespun was uniquely suited to the day to day lives of colonial women. Although spinning was time consuming, it was easy to pick up and put down, allowing other chores to be completed. It was also easy and convenient for women to spin in their homes. Conversely, commercial weaving at this time was mostly a male-dominated commercial craft, as it required more skill and economic investment. Commercial looms were much larger in size than spinning wheels, therefore less portable and far more costly to acquire and assemble.

Diaries and journals of the eighteenth century tell us about weaving within the home, and the sharing of responsibilities for this arduous task. Fathers and sons felled trees and constructed looms, while mothers and daughters prepared the ground to plant flax seeds, which produced the fibers used in weaving. Because looms were large and cumbersome, women owning looms invited other women into their homes to weave. Tasks were assigned according to the skill level of each woman. One might be responsible for the difficult job of threading the loom while a less skilled person might be the one who “threw the shuttle” (Ulrich 1998).

Spinning circles, or bees, became commonplace in the years leading up to the revolution. Women would assemble, sometimes having carried their spinning wheels on their backs for two or three miles from their homes. These circles also provided opportunities to socialize and to discuss politics. Most of the participants worked from five in the morning until seven in the evening, producing up to fifty knots of spun yarn, which was about 75 yards (“Processing Wool,” n.d.).

The trading of this yarn for other needed items such as milk or eggs, as well as more expensive items that could no longer be purchased, such as sugar, spices, kettles or pots, contributed to the growth of a female “underground” economy in the 18th century. In this case “underground economy” refers to the transfer of goods and services outside the scrutiny of the laws regulating commerce. By operating this way, people did not have to pay the taxes imposed on regular transfers levied by the British. Often, such economic activities were not officially recorded in books, but the people involved remembered the transactions in more informal ways, which makes the underground economy hard for historians to study. Women were more likely to participate in this underground economy than in the official one, since the laws of commerce did not allow married women much of a role. Furthermore, such economic participation no doubt provided women with a powerful sense of self-worth (Bethlehem Digital History Project, 2000; Rood, 1996).

Enslaved women also had to learn the task of spinning in the revolutionary period. We can see evidence of this in this excerpt from an advertisement attempting to locate twelve runaway slaves in 1780: “Young Hannah and Nan are exceedingly good flax spinners.” The value attached to these skills was reflected by the large reward that was posted for the return of these women (Baltimore Maryland Journal and Baltimore Advertiser, June 27, 1780. Supplement).

For most enslaved women, producing homespun was less of a political statement than it was for free women, since they were not doing so by choice. And while some may have been proud of their cloth-making skills, spinning more likely simply represented an increase in their work load. The irony of the situation, that these enslaved women had to work harder so their masters could make a statement about “freedom,” was undoubtedly not lost on them. Of course, enslaved women did make
political statements of their own: during the revolutionary period the number of women who freed themselves by running away increased manifold. Some ended up working for the British army, while others passed themselves off as free in southern and northern cities (Smith, 1999).

The non-importation movement profoundly affected the roles and responsibilities of free and enslaved women in colonial and post-Revolutionary America. During this period more and more women acquired spinning and weaving skills, engaged in political discussions and contributed to the colonial economy. Although many would agree that these 18th century women lived circumscribed lives, their actions suggest that they pursued life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to the fullest of their abilities (Kars, 2004; Raphael, 2001).

**Bibliography:**


Kars, Marjoleine (2004). Lectures, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Summer Institute History Program.


**Vocabulary:**

**Boycott:** To protest by refusing to purchase from someone, or otherwise do business with them. In international trade, a boycott most often takes the form of refusal to import a country's goods.

**Calico:** A plain-woven cotton cloth printed with a figured pattern, usually on one side.

**Cravat:** A cloth, often made of or trimmed with lace, worn about the neck by men.

**Colonists:** Term used for the residents of the colonies of British North America that joined together in the American Revolution against the mother country, adopted the Declaration of Independence in 1776, and became the United States.

**Lutestring:** A silk fabric of high sheen, formerly used in the manufacture of dresses.

**Luxury:** Something that is an indulgence rather than a necessity.

**Manufactured:** The transformation of raw materials into finished goods for sale.

**Petticoat:** A woman's slip or underskirt that is often full and trimmed with ruffles or lace.

**Resentment:** A feeling of deep and bitter anger and ill-will.

**Taffeta:** A plain-woven fabric with a slight sheen, made of various fibers, such as silk, linen, or wool; used especially for women's garments.
Taxes:
Sums imposed by a government authority upon persons or property to pay for government services.

Teaching Procedures:

1. Display a transparency of Resource Sheet #1, "Map of North America: 1775."

   Explain that this is the time period students will be studying during this lesson and lead students in a recall discussion of all that is going on in the North American continent during this time period. Be sure to include controlling forces, Colonists, Indians, Slaves, territories, geographic terms, and important dates in the discussion.

   Use this discussion to clarify vocabulary as needed. Introduce new words and phrases from the vocabulary list. Use heavy chart paper and marking pens to list and define words for this unit.

2. Engage students in a brief dramatic scenario:

   Explain to students that you will no longer be accepting any written work from them unless it contains a special stamp. Tell students that you will be more than happy to provide them with the stamp, so long as they pay you $.25 for each time you stamp their papers. Tell them there is no place else they can get the stamp. Additionally, remind students that if they do not turn in any written work, they will fail your class. So, unless students pay $.25 to have their written work stamped each time they turn it in, they will not pass. Allow students to share their reactions to your new "Stamp Act."

   After sufficient time for students to share their displeasure, tell students that you were only joking, but explain that a similar situation really did occur for the American colonists in 1765. Display a transparency of Resource Sheet #2 "Image of Tax Stamp," and provide students with information about the Stamp Act. Ask students to put themselves in the place of the colonists and share how they think the colonists felt or may have reacted.

3. Inform students that the lesson will focus on one of the reactions the colonists had to the Stamp Act, as well as the later taxes Britain imposed on the colonists. Introduce and discuss materials related to the Non-Importation Movement (see the Topic Background for ideas).

   Emphasize the need for locating substitutions for items that were boycotted during the non-importation movement. Have students practice suggesting substitutions by brainstorming substitutions for cheeseburgers or pizza.

4. Display a transparency of the first page of Resource Sheet #3 "Newspaper Advertisement." Explain to students that this was a newspaper advertisement
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from the Maryland Gazette, published in 1774. This is a list of items that were for sale, but because of the Non-Importation Movement these items were boycotted. Explain to students that you will be using a shortened version of this list in the next activity. (Note: You may use the full transcription on the second page of Resource Sheet #3 as a reference tool.)

5. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet #4, "Transcription for Student Use," and draw students' attention to the list of imported items on the page. Read through the list of items with the students. Invite students to ask questions about any words they do not understand. Refer back to vocabulary list if necessary (Note: pay special attention to the term "lutestring" - it is a type of silk fabric).

NOTE: Depending on the ability level of your class, students may need a brief reminder of what raw materials and resources were available to the colonists.

6. Explain to students that during colonial times women were the people who did most of the shopping for the household. With the boycott in place, women would now not be able to buy the items that they just read about in Resource Sheet #4. Ask the students what they think women would have to do in order to replace these goods that they could no longer buy. Students may need a little prompting in order to come up with the answer that women would make the items that they needed. You can explain to students that one of the things women began making themselves was cloth. Women began participating in spinning circles or "bees" where they would gather together and spin large amounts of cloth. Be sure to mention that it was a much coarser and heavier (and itchier!) fabric than the satin and velvet they could have purchased from the British. But by making and wearing their own material, they were taking a stand against the British and the heavy taxes they were imposing on their goods. Explain to students that their task will be to work with a small group to determine possible substitutions colonial women could make for the goods they just read about in Resource Sheet #4 using only the raw materials and resources available to them at that time.

7. Break students into small groups and distribute copies of Resource Sheet #5 "Substitutions Chart." Instruct groups to select imports from the list on Resource Sheet #4 and determine possible substitutions for these items. Remind students that these substitutions would need to be items that women would be able to make on their own or in a group.

8. After students have had sufficient time to work on Resource Sheet #5, explain that they will be creating a chart of their group’s best ideas to share with the class. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet #6 "Rubric," and discuss it with the students so they understand how their ideas, chart, and oral presentation will be graded.
Distribute chart paper and marking pens to each group. Monitor as groups begin to chart their best substitution ideas.

9. Assess student understanding using Resource Sheet #6 to evaluate groups as they share their best ideas for substitutions for the boycotted imports. Display the group's charts in the classroom and share ideas with other classes.

10. To conclude the activity bring students back together as a class and ask them what they think the long term effect of such a boycott would be. Questions for discussion can include:

   **What kind of impact do you think the boycott had on the daily lives of colonial women?** Colonial women now had to produce substitutes for the goods that they would be boycotting.

   **Did the boycott make women's lives easier or harder? Why?** The boycott made women's lives harder because they now had to make many of the goods they had become accustomed to buying. Now, in addition to the responsibilities of raising children and maintaining a household, women also had to make various other goods.

   **Would the students themselves have participated in the boycott? Why or why not?** Student may have participated in the boycott to protest the heavy taxes imposed by the British. At the beginning of the lesson when the teacher pretended to impose a tax for grading papers, the students may have felt that this was unfair, much like the colonists felt the heavy taxes by the British were unfair. Students may opt not to have participated in the boycott because it would have made their lives too difficult. The tasks of producing cloth and other goods made the lives of colonial women even harder and some student may point out that they would have rather paid the heavy taxes.

11. Possible extensions activities can include the following.

   Students could further research the daily lives of colonial women and their roles in society. Students could present their findings by drawing a picture or cartoon of what a woman's daily life would have been like.

   Students could perform a tea party using items selected from the student's substitution lists.

**Primary Source Annotation:**

**Resource Sheet #1 - Map of North America 1750-1776**  
Produced by U.S. Dept. of Interior.  
Educational materials were developed through the Teaching American History in Baltimore City Program, a partnership between the Baltimore City Public School System and the Center for History Education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

This primary source will allow students to see what North America looked like during the time period they are studying.

**Resource Sheet #2 - Image of Tax Stamp**
National Archives and Records Administration, Courtesy of Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston MA.

This primary source will give students the opportunity to view the actual impression placed on official documents, wills, newspapers and other articles when the Stamp Act was imposed in 1765.

**Resource Sheet #3 - Newspaper Advertisement, The Maryland Gazette, June 2, 1774. Special Collections (Maryland State Law Library Collection of the Maryland Gazette) MSA SC 2311-1-14. [D11825-28A], Maryland State Archives: Documents for the Classroom: MSA SC 2221-21-10-3.**

This primary source will allow students to view an advertisement placed in a newspaper to announce the arrival of imported goods from England.