

Reporting Ethnic Violence

GRADE LEVEL: 9-12

INTRODUCTION

“Our whole community was excited to an ungovernable pitch, by a most bloody and terrible riot, which occurred in the district of Kensington. We have never heard of a transaction in our city in which so much savage feeling and brutal ferocity were displayed.” This quote appeared in one of the pro-nativist pamphlets circulated after the Philadelphia riots of 1844, in which anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic forces violently attacked Irish residents and burned two Catholic churches in the neighborhoods of Southwark and Kensington.

1844 was not the first time working people of Philadelphia took to the streets in protest, attacking individuals and destroying property, nor would it be the last. Hostility permeated the antebellum city and was often highly discriminate, revealing the fears, anxieties, and challenges of a growing city and nation. Placing these riots in a larger context offers insights into the role violence played in negotiating social, economic and political changes in a rapidly changing period of American history.

In this activity, students draw on a variety of sources and first-person accounts about the 1844 anti-Irish riots in Philadelphia to discuss point of view in historical narrative and generate their own interpretation of what happened.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Violence in nineteenth-century Philadelphia had many origins, several of them resulting from the growing pains of a rapidly expanding and industrializing city. Urbanization brought an increasing number of “strangers” into the city from points abroad as well as the surrounding countryside. Many newcomers took up residence in suburban neighborhoods such as Kensington, Southwark, and Moyamensing (then outside the limits of Philadelphia city proper), where overcrowding and unsanitary conditions exacerbated already existing tensions created by different religious beliefs, economic habits, and social mores.

Disgruntled laborers also resorted to violence when the nature of work began changing in the 1820s during a period of rapid industrialization. Previously skilled positions often became unskilled factory work, and rioting was one way that artisans countered the mechanization of their trades, voicing their anger against changing workplaces and the surplus of unskilled labor that was threatening to drive down wages. As early as 1828, a mob attacked Irish weavers in Kensington after they displayed a banner outside their workplace.

For the full text of the larger five-page essay from which this historical context is taken, visit the Historical Society of Pennsylvania website for “City of Unbrotherly Love: Violence in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia” at: <http://www.hsp.org/files/thephiladelphiariotsof1844.pdf>.

THEMES: social unrest, industrialization, urbanization, ethnic conflict

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students, following this activity, will understand:

1. What forces contributed to the instability of early nineteenth-century city life.
2. How to compare and contrast historical accounts of the same event.
3. Draw conclusions about how author and audience shape the content of primary documents.

NEW JERSEY STANDARDS

STANDARD 6.1 (Social Studies Skills) All students will utilize historical thinking, problem solving, and research skills to maximize their understanding of civics, history, geography, and economics.

STANDARD 6.2 (Civics) All students will know, understand and appreciate the values and principles of American democracy and the rights, responsibilities, and roles of a citizen in the nation and the World.

MATERIALS

- Copies of five document sets (one set will be assigned to each of five groups of students; full text versions of these documents are available at the “One Nation, Many Americans” (ONMAP) website. They appear under Year 2: The 19th Century, as “Anti-Irish” primary documents at http://www.etc.net/tah/Primary_Documents-October%2024-2008.html.
- Document analysis sheet

For follow-up activity (newspaper creation):

- Glue
- Paper
- Scissors
- Rulers
- OR, if you have the capacity to do so, students can design their newspapers on computers in the school lab or at home as a follow-up assignment.

DETAILS OF ACTIVITY

Part 1: Setting the Stage (10 min.):

Set the 1844 Philadelphia riots in the political, social, and economic context of the period (using the historical context essay cited above). Emphasize the rise of the “Know-Nothings” and the Native American party, structural change in the American economy, rapid growth of population and industry in Philadelphia, the ethnic make up of Philadelphia in 1844, the rising tide of Irish immigration to the United States and Pennsylvania.

Divide students into five groups and provide one document set to each group (so that each group has a different perspective (remember, document packets for this activity are clustered together on the ONMAP website. A list of all documents by set also appears at the end of this lesson plan.

Part 2: Studying the Sources (30 min.)

Allow 15-20 minutes for students to examine their primary accounts of the 1844 riots and discuss the chain of events their documents provide. Have students use the document worksheet to answer the following questions: What is the religious and/or ethnic background of the document's author (protestant, catholic, Irish, etc)? How does the writer feel about the Irish (negative, sympathetic)? What values seem important to him/her?

Have each group report on their findings and record responses on the board. What elements of the story remain constant regardless of the "point of view" of the author? Which change? Ask students to speculate why these changes might occur.

Part 3: History Reporters (50 min.)

If you have enough time (or want to use two class periods), encourage students to role-play as the staff of the *Philadelphia Daily Ledger*, a fictional nineteenth-century newspaper in Philadelphia charged with reporting on the Philadelphia riots of 1844.

Keep students in their small groups and ask them to produce an issue of the paper for late July 1844. Each group represents a newspaper staff and each member accepts a different staff position with the following assignments:

- **Staff reporter(s):** write a blow-by-blow account of the riots, including a description of what happened and mock interviews with major players (rioters, police/militia, Irish parishioners)
- **Editor:** write an op-ed piece condemning or supporting the violence, with reasons why they offer this position
- **Photographer/Illustrator:** create images of the riots and their aftermath and develop appropriate captions.
- **Citizen letter to the editor:** write a letter from an outraged citizen supporting or condemning the paper's editorial stance and offering an alternative view. Multiple letters might be submitted in order to capture the perspective of a Native American party member, an Irish Catholic immigrant, or a police/military volunteer.

After students select their roles, they should discuss the details of the newspaper's layout. What will be the column size, font, etc.? When students have written a rough draft and peer edited their work, they should type their final draft according to the standards they agreed upon and assemble the paper in class.

PRACTICE/REINFORCEMENT

Have students share their newspapers across each group and compare them. Discuss:

1. How do the editorials and accounts reflect the attitudes of the day?
2. How well did each group capture the feelings and attitudes of the past?
3. How would an event like the riots be covered in the media today?

REFERENCES and WEBSITES:

This lesson plan is adapted from “Reporting Ethnic Violence,” part of the *Pennsylvania Ethnic History* curriculum guide produced by the Education Department of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania: <http://www.hsp.org>.

For more information about industrialization, urbanization and ethnic violence see:

Gary Nash, *First City: Philadelphia and the Forging of American Memory* (Penn Press, 2002), chapter 5, “A City in Flux.”

David Montgomery, “The Shuttle and the Cross: Weavers and Artisans in the Kensington Riots of 1844,” *Journal of Social History* Vol. 5, No. 4 (Summer 1972): 411-446.

Primary Document Sets: Riots of 1844

(all posted as PDF files at: http://www.etc.net/tah/Primary_Documents-October%2024-2008.html)

DOCUMENT SET #1:

- *The Catholic Herald*, Thursday, May 9, 1844 (3 pp.)
- *Address of the Catholic Lay Citizens of the City...in Regard to the Causes of the Late Riots in Philadelphia.* (Philadelphia, 1844, excerpts, 3 pp.)
- *The Catholic Herald*, Thursday, July 11, 1844 (2 pp)

These three documents provide Catholic accounts of the 1844 riots between Protestants and Catholics in Philadelphia, and blame mobs and an angry crowd from the “Native Americans” meeting, an association that argued against increased immigration in favor of “native” born Americans, for inciting violence and vandalizing property.

DOCUMENT SET #2:

- “The Kensington Massacre,” *The Republic, A Magazine for the Defence of Civil and Religious Liberty*, No. 1, August 1845 (3 pp.)
- “The Southwark Riots,” *The Republic, A Magazine for the Defence of Civil and Religious Liberty* (Philadelphia, August 1845, excerpts, 3 pp.)

These two documents were written by supporters of the “Native” American movement and describe a law-abiding and peaceful assembly disrupted by “Irish carters” who “forced their way through the crowd and incited “inexcusable outrage upon the meeting.”

DOCUMENT SET #3:

- *The Full Particulars of the Late Riots, With a View of the Burning of the Catholic Churches, St. Michael's & St. Augustine* (Philadelphia, 1844, excerpts, 5 pp.)
- “The Southwark Riots,” *Public Ledger* v. 17, July 23, 1844 (3 pp.)

These two documents, also Nativist in perspective, provide the most vivid, day-by-day accounts of the 1844 riots. Because they were written so close to the events, they are more descriptive about individuals and actions and less analytical. Thus, they make an interesting set to compare to other later documents.

DOCUMENT SET #4:

- *The Truth Unveiled; or, a Calm and Impartial Exposition of the Origin and Immediate Cause of the Terrible Riots and Rebellion in Philadelphia.* By a Protestant and Native Philadelphian. Baltimore: Metropolitan Tract Society, 1844 (2 pp.)

- *Reflections on the Late Riots by Candid Writers in Poetry and Prose* (Philadelphia, 1844, excerpts, 3 pp.)
- *Six Months Ago, or the Eventful Friday, and Its Consequences. An Epic Poem* (Philadelphia: J.F.M. McElroy, 1844, 1 pp.)

This set includes two poems—one written by a Protestant and the other by a Catholic. They are useful in thinking about how other media—like poetry—record historical events for future generations to interpret.

DOCUMENT SET #5:

- ‘The Riots,’ *Pennsylvania Freeman*, n. 14 (July 18, 1844, 6 pp.)

The final document set is written by members of the free African-American community of Philadelphia. This group experienced prejudice also, and it is interesting to see their perspective on what Irish immigrants faced, as well as possible suggestions to prevent future violence.

Primary Document Analysis Worksheet: Riots of 1844

Title of Document

Date of riot

Location of riot

How did the riot begin?

Who began the riot?

*What was the role of nativists
in the riot?*

*What was the role of Catholics
in the riot?*

*What was the role of the
military?*

*What was the result of the
events?*

*What is the perspective of the
author of this document? Is
there any obvious bias?*

Explain.

*Any other important
information?*
