

Spinning and Spinning Bees

Supplement to Lesson 22: A New British Policy

Supplement Activity Overview and Rationale:

Using two primary sources, students will consider the increasing importance of colonial self-sufficiency in the pre-Revolutionary years. This supplement is to show the active role of women in revolutionary resistance.

Instructional Objectives:

Students will

1. Examine colonial propaganda used to influence public opinion.
2. Explore ways in which colonists supported independence from Britain.

Materials:

Handout “Polly Allen Avery’s Remembrance of a Patriotic Spinning Contest in Boston”

Handout “Foreign Productions She Rejects”

Background for the Teacher:

In newspaper articles of the 1760s and 1770s, women were urged to take responsibility for the success of the colonial boycott of British goods by making items that they had previously purchased. In this context, the real significance of patriotic spinning bees becomes clear. Men felt that most of the items they were taxed on were products that women used, such as imported textiles, imported teas, tea wares, silver and ceramics. If women would forgo these imported luxuries for the sake of patriotism, the colonial boycott of British goods had a better chance of working. The patriotic spinning bee might have been a plan to persuade ladies that homespun and simple wares were stylishly acceptable, in the name of liberty.

But the goal was not really to have every home producing skeins and skeins of linen and woolen thread, but to have women publicly showing their rejection of costly imported goods and their support for new, simpler styles of clothing and household furnishing.

In the first primary source, “Polly Allen Avery’s Remembrance of a Patriotic Spinning Contest in Boston, around 1770,” the granddaughter of Polly Allen Avery tells a story about her grandmother that was often repeated in the family. Polly was born in Boston in 1755 to Joseph Allen, a tailor, and Mary Adams, sister of the patriot Sam Adams. After her father died, 15 year old Polly went to live with her Uncle Sam Adams, the famous revolutionary leader. Polly was a teenager in Boston during the colonial boycott of British goods.

“Grandmother expressed a great interest and much enthusiasm in regard to the great questions which agitated the country,” writes Polly’s granddaughter Mary. “She spoke of the terror they all felt, when one day a mounted horseman rode furiously through the street shouting at the top of his voice: ‘Our brethren are falling like slaughtered sheep in King Street’ (now State Street).” This event that Polly remembered so well was the Boston Massacre.



“Polly Allen Avery’s Remembrance of a Patriotic Spinning Contest” reveals several interesting things about spinning contests. It was the “select” young misses of the best patriot families who received spinning lessons. At the end of their instruction there was a spinning contest for all the girls that doubled as a large, community social event.

The public spinning by social elites was more of a patriotic ceremony than a true transition to a widespread increase in local textile production. The issue here, as Polly herself sums it up, was honor. In this case it was the symbolic act of swearing off purchasing expensive imported textiles in support of the colonial boycott of British goods.

The second primary source, the poem “Foreign Productions She Rejects” was published in the *Boston Evening Post* on September 11, 1769.

Procedure

1. After completing **Lesson 22: A New British Policy**, review the colonial boycott of British goods as a response to the Townsend Acts. In particular, introduce the importance of women spinning thread for fabric as a replacement for imported British fabric.
2. Hand out “Polly Allen Avery’s Remembrance of a Patriotic Spinning Contest in Boston.” Read aloud with the class. Discuss the vocabulary and possibly re-read the piece. As a class, lead a discussion based on the following questions:

- How did people get their clothes in colonial times? What if you were from a wealthy family? What if you weren’t?

In colonial times, the women in the family were responsible for the family members clothes. In the wealthiest of all families, the finished clothes may have been purchased from a shop. In the merely well off, fabric could be imported from England ready to be cut and sewn into clothes for a lesser cost. In the least wealthy families (which is to say most families) the women and girls would harvest flax or raw wool, prepare it to be spun into thread, do all the spinning, weave the spun thread into fabric, then cut and sew the clothes.

- What is meant by the term “select” families? Who are the “select” families?

The select families are those with wealth or status.

- What was the special purpose in teaching the daughters of the “select” families to spin in support of the colonial boycott? What is the purpose of having the public view the girls’ skill at the end of instruction?

The special purpose in teaching the daughters of select families to spin was in setting a fashionable example for all others to follow. As fashion often dictates behavior and most women and girls followed the example of the select daughters. Polly was probably included in this group because of her connection to Sam Adams.

- Polly’s granddaughter calls it “the art of spinning” Would the average family think of spinning as an “art?” No! Why not?



The average family would not think of spinning as an art. Spinning was a time consuming, regular chore for the daughters of an average family.

- How would you describe the honor that Polly's grandmother felt after the contest?
3. Hand out the poem "Foreign Productions She Rejects." Consider the source of this poem. Why would the newspaper publish it? Who was the audience it was intended to reach? For what purpose? Read it together as a class.
 4. Use the questions to consider as a jumping off point for a class discussion of the poem. Ask students what other ways colonists could have used to show they didn't need British products?

Additional activity:

Help students understand the difficulty of arranging a successful boycott by moving the colonial boycott of British goods to the modern day. Assign students to choose one item from their daily life that is used a great deal.

The chosen product is going to be boycotted in support of the nation (town, school, whatever) as a whole. The students' task is to:

- 1) Choose an appropriate item to boycott.
- 2) Determine what accommodations everyone will need to make to boycott this product. Can something be used in its place? How to get replacements if necessary. (Does it need to be made? Who will make it?)
- 3) Decide how to persuade other people the boycott is important and any inconvenience is worth it.

You can do this as a class, individually or in small groups.



Polly Allen Avery's Remembrance of a Patriotic Spinning Contest in Boston, around 1770

From the "Reminiscences of Thomas White and Mary White Davis"

Polly was a teenager in Boston in the 1700s where she lived with her uncle, the famous revolutionary leader Sam Adams. As you know, the British taxed the colonists on various products and the colonists rebelled. One of the ways they thought to rebel was by refusing to buy the British goods that were taxed, such as fabric made in England.

But how to inspire everyone to boycott? A boycott doesn't work well unless a LOT of people do it together.

Read Polly's story below, (which was written by Polly's granddaughter, Mary) and see if you can figure out the answers to the questions that follow. All the words in bold have definitions on the next page.

"An interesting incident of those days, which my grandmother related, was the formation of an association of young misses from the select families of those who were known, as she termed them, the 'High Sons and Daughters of Liberty,' who should be instructed by a **competent** teacher in the art of spinning **flax** upon the little wheel. My grandmother was invited to join them.

Each young lady was provided with a wheel and material to work with, and at the close of the term of instruction, was presented with the wheel upon which she spun. There was also an **exhibition** of their skill . . . at the close of the term, given at Faneuil Hall, when a prize would be **adjudged** to the young lady who should produce the greatest number of knots of good thread from a given amount of flax (a half-pound, I think) in the shortest period of time.

I have often heard my grandmother speak of the **trepidation** of mind she experienced in the presence of the 'High Sons and Daughters of Liberty.' As she was **intent** on her spinning, one of the aforesaid people, in walking around and noting the busy workers, **drew near** her wheel and remarked 'Oh, you will get the prize,' but that she pointed to the wheel of a near neighbor, saying, 'Oh no sir; see Miss Blank's spool is much fuller than mine.' But he said, 'Don't you see, Puss, yours is the finest!'

At the close of the trial, when led by the hand onto the platform, where it was announced that Miss Polly Allen Avery had spun the greatest number of knots of good yarn from the **given quantity** of flax in the shortest time and was adjudged worthy of the prize, she felt very much **abashed**.

'What was the prize?' we asked. She replied, 'only a **laurel wreath**, but the honor!'



Vocabulary for Polly Allen Avery's Remembrance of a Spinning Contest

competent: experienced, skilled

flax: a plant that produces linen, a thin, light-colored thread used to make fabric

exhibition: presentation, demonstration, show

adjudge: judge, decide

trepidation: nervousness, anxiety

intent: focused

drew near: came closer

given quantity: set, agreed upon number

abashed: embarrassed

laurel wreath: ring of simple green leaves worn on the head to show victory

Questions to consider

- How did people get their clothes in colonial times? What if you were from a wealthy family? What if you weren't?
- What is meant by the term "select" families? Who are the "select" families?
- What was the special purpose in teaching the daughters of the "select" families to spin in support of the colonial boycott? What is the purpose of having the public view the girls' skill at the end of instruction?
- Polly's granddaughter calls it "the art of spinning" Would the average family think of spinning as an "art?" Why or why not?
- How would you describe the honor that Polly's grandmother felt?



Foreign Productions She Rejects

From the *Boston Evening Post*, September 11, 1769

Foreign productions she rejects
With nobleness of mind
For home commodities, to which
She's prudently inclined

foreign: from out of this country

commodities: products
prudently: sensibly, wisely

She works, she lends, she gives away
The labors of her hand.
The priest, the poor, the people all,
Do find in her the friend.

She clothes herself and family,
And all the sons of need;
Were all this virtuous, soon we'd find
Our Land from slavery freed.

virtuous: honorable

Questions to consider

- a) Who is the "she" this poem keeps mentioning?
- b) What are the "foreign productions she rejects?"
- c) How does she show her rejection of these products?
- d) What does "our Land" refer to?
- e) How will the rejection lead to "our Land from slavery freed?"
- f) Who are the slaves or enslaved people being spoken of here?
- g) What would you say this poem is about?

