

Source set: disability in Rev Era

Disability in the Revolutionary Era

Inquiry Questions

- How did disabilities shape the lives of people living in the late 1700s?
- How does using a lens of disability in reading primary sources help us to better understand the Revolutionary Era?

Historical Overview

- [Teacher Background Reading](#)
- [Student Background Reading](#)

MA History/Social Science Frameworks

- **Guiding Principle 2:** An effective history and social science education incorporates diverse perspectives and acknowledges that perceptions of events are affected by race, ethnicity, culture, religion, education, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, and personal experience

Skill-based standards:

- 2. Develop focused questions or problem statements and conduct inquiries.
- 4. Analyze the purpose and point of view of each source; distinguish opinion from fact

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Spectacles belonging to Samuel Dexter, circa 1785

Context: Samuel Dexter (1761-1816) was approximately 25 years old when he got these spectacles, and likely wore them when he was admitted to the bar and became a lawyer in Worcester, MA in 1786. Although Dexter had impaired eyesight in early adulthood, for many Americans in the early Republic (and today), worsening eyesight was part of the aging process.



John Adams' eyesight: In a letter to his wife Abigail in February 1777, a 42-year-old John Adams wrote about his eyesight:

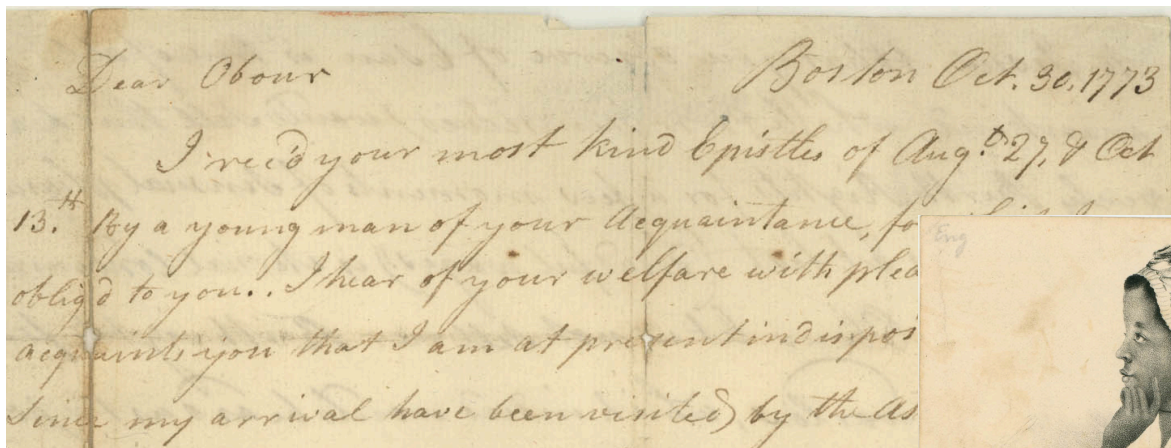
"I am as yet in **tollerable** Health. My Eyes are somewhat troublesome. I believe I must assume the Appearance of Wisdom, Age and Gravity and put on Spectacles to walk in, about the Streets."

- John Adams, 1777

Tollerable (tolerable): decent

Asthma: Phillis Wheatley Writes discusses her health in a 1773 letter to her friend

Phillis Wheatley's letter: When Phillis Wheatley wrote this letter to her friend Obour Tanner on 30 October 1773 she had recently returned to Boston from England, where her book *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was published. In the letter, which she writes as a newly emancipated woman, she discusses her health, travel, and religion, and seeks Tanner's help in selling her book in Tanner's town of Newport, RI.



Boston Oct. 30, 1773

Dear Obour

I rec'd your most kind Epistles of Augt. 27, & Oct 13th. By a young man of your Acquaintance, for which I am obligd to you. I hear of your welfare with pleasure; but this acquaints you that I am at present indispos'd by a cold. & Since my arrival have been visited by the Asthma. –



Remedies: Asthma was common in 18th century British America. People sought remedies for their health from friends or in published books and almanacs that used familiar ingredients they could find around town.

VALUABLE RECEIPTS and DIRECTIONS.

For the Asthma.

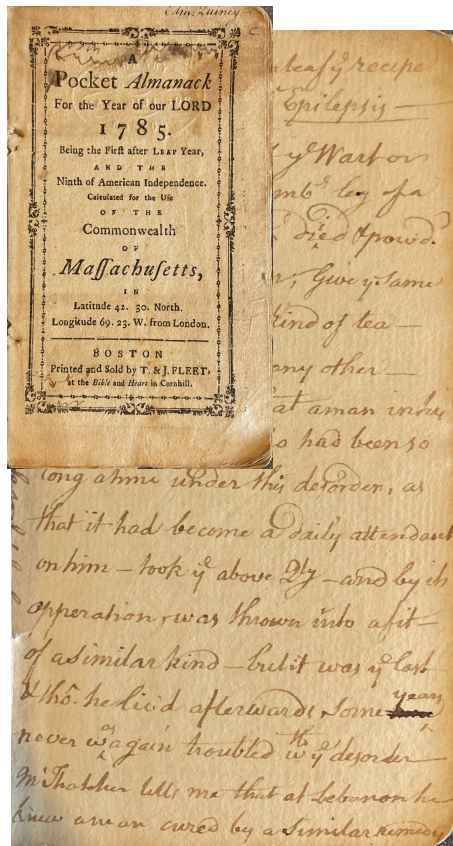
CUT an ounce of stick liquorice into slices, steep them in a quart of water 24 hours, and use it, when you are worse than usual, as common drink; Or, drink half a pint of tar water twice a day; Or, live on boiled carrots only for a fortnight; it seldom fails. For present relief vomit with a quart or more of warm water; do this whenever you find any motion to vomit, and always keep your body open.

Epilepsy: Edmund Quincy jots down a medical recipe for his son-in-law

Context: Edmund Quincy was a Boston merchant who had supported the Patriot cause in the Revolutionary War. Inside the pages of his 1785 almanac, Quincy wrote down a supposed cure for the seizures associated with epilepsy for his son-in-law, William Greenleaf, a sheriff in Worcester County. He also wrote down a recipe for treating asthma. Handwritten medical recipes from the 18th century can tell historians about the types of illnesses or conditions a person's family members faced, and how they tried to treat them.

Handwritten 'remedy' for epilepsy: In this domestic remedy for epilepsy, Quincy writes down the ingredients and how to administer them, and he also tells a story about how he got this recipe (from a local judge) and shares anecdotal evidence of it curing two other people as the reason why he is sharing it with his son-in-law.

The transcription has been slightly modified for clarity.



Sent Son Greenleaf the **recipe** following – to Cure the Epilepsy from Judge Gardner

Take as much of the Wart or Outgrowth of the shank leg of a Stallion, as when dried & powdered Will Cover a Copper [coin]; Give the same To the patient in any kind of tea – Muller [tea] is as proper as any other – it is said by G[ardner], that a man in his Father's family, who has been so Long a time under this disorder, as that it had become a daily attendant on him – took the above Quantity – and by its operation, was thrown into a **fit** – of a similar kind – but it was the last & though he lived afterwards some years, never was again troubled [with] the disorder. M. Thatcher tells me that at Lebanon [New Hampshire]

he Knew a man cured by a Similar remedy.

Recipe: remedy

Fit: seizure

Almshouses: Disability and poverty



Context: Disabled people whose families or communities could not support them typically ended up impoverished and incarcerated in local almshouses alongside the general population of the early American poor. Almshouses provided food, shelter and medicine, but could have poor conditions.

Almshouse Admissions: Below is a sampling of records from 1768-1775 that document the admission of disabled individuals to the Boston almshouse (represented by 'g' on [this map](#) of colonial Boston), showing a connection between

disability and poverty in the late 18th century. These records were kept by the Boston Overseers of the Poor.

Received into the Almshouse by the order of the Boston Overseers of the Poor:

[Modified Excerpt]

[26 July 1768] Mary Blake subject to **Fits**

[2 June 1770] Mary Brown, **distracted** Woman, sent to **Workhouse**

[16 May 1770] Christopher Atkinson, **Lame** Man

[25 December 1770] James Kilpatrick, **distracted**,

[1 May 1773] John Barrett, a poor, **Dumb** Child

[8 May 1775] Venus, a Negro woman, old & **infirm**

[9 May 1775] Mary Davis, Deaf & **Dumb**

[15 May 1775] Janny Ricks, a Blind Negro

Fits: seizures

Distracted: suggesting a form of mental illness/disconnected from reality

Workhouse: housing for poor people who were able to work to earn their keep

Lame: an injury to feet or legs that impairs the ability to walk

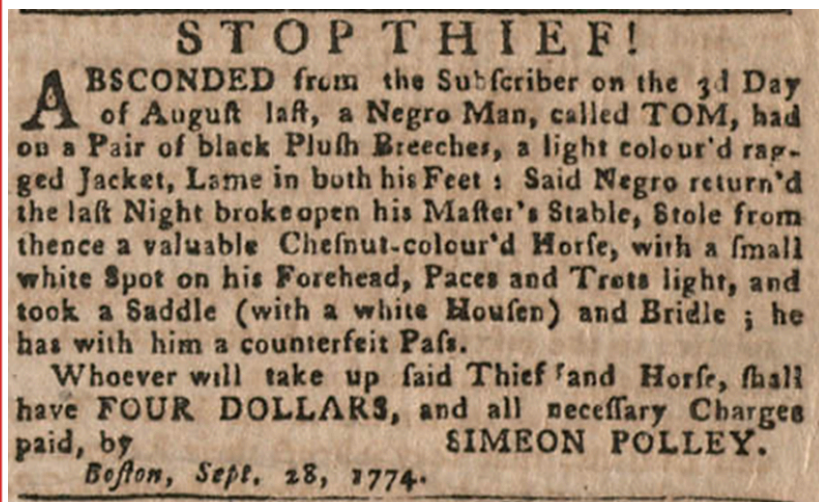
Infirm: weak

Dumb: does not speak

Enslavement: Liberation ads & disability

Context: In 18th century Massachusetts, enslavement was a cause of disability. Long, forced labor and an enslaver's legal right to physically punish enslaved persons could both cause people to acquire bodily impairments. Until the end of slavery in Massachusetts in 1790, Boston newspapers commonly advertised the recapture of enslaved people who had freed themselves. Historians can learn about the disabilities of enslaved people – and their continued resilience and humanity – through the enslavers' descriptions of those who took risks to free themselves.

Newspaper Ad about Tom: Based on newspaper records, between 1767 and 1774, a man named Tom attempted to free himself from his enslaver, Simeon Polley, at least three times. Tom was an accomplished horse rider – two of the three newspaper ads make reference to this skill. Only the last ad (below), describes Tom as disabled ("lame in both feet"), which suggests the possibility Tom may have been punished by Polley for previous attempts to free himself.



STOP THIEF!

ABSCONDED from the Subscriber on the 3rd Day of August last, a **Negro** Man, called TOM, had on a Pair of black Plush **Breeches**, a light colour'd ragged Jacket, **Lame** in both his Feet: Said Negro return'd the last Night broke open his Master's Stable, Stole from thence a valuable Chesnut-colour'd Horse, with a small white Spot on his Forehead, Paces and Trots light, and took a Saddle (with a white **Housen**) and Bridle; he

has with him a **counterfeit Pass**.

Whoever will take up said Thief and Horse, shall have FOUR DOLLARS, and all necessary Charges paid, by SIMEON POLLEY.

Boston, Sept. 28, 1774.

Breeches: short pants fastened just below the knee; especially, pants for horse riding

Lame: unable to walk well due to an injury; Tom likely walked with a noticeable limp

Housen: housing – the back part of a saddle

Counterfeit pass: a fake pass; enslaved people were only allowed to be out at night in Boston, or travel beyond their enslaver's home or workplace, if they had a written pass from their enslaver granting them permission. Tom either wrote his own pass, or had an ally write it for him.

Revolutionary War: Surgeon's Kit used for amputations

Context: Many Revolutionary War veterans became disabled during the war. In particular, injuries sustained from cannon and gunfire resulted in many limb amputations performed by surgeons on ships and battlefields or in hospitals. Most surgeons had not gone to medical school or received formal training.

John Adams' letter: In a letter to Samuel Cooper on June 9, 1776, John Adams cautions against the Continental Army engaging in too many battle fronts too quickly, and gives a list of reasons why, including a lack of medical resources.

"The Want of Physicians, Surgeons, Apothecaries, Medicines, amputating and **trepanning Instruments**, has been a great Misfortune to the sick and wounded and Discouragement to the Army."

- John Adams, 9 June 1776

Trepanning instruments: used to cut a hole in the skull to remove pressure

Surgeon's Kit: The U.S. Navy was founded in October 1775. This kit of medical instruments belonged to U.S. Navy surgeon William Swift. He served during the War of 1812. Surgeon kits in the Revolutionary War would also have had instruments seen here, including ones used for amputation.



Revolutionary War: John Adams witnesses an amputation

Context: The Revolutionary War was a cause of disability for many who served. Injuries sustained from cannon and gunfire resulted in many limb amputations performed on ships and battlefields or in hospitals.

John Adams' Diary: On March 10, 1778, John Adams wrote a diary entry describing the amputation of the right leg of a Lieutenant named Mr. Barron after an accidental cannon burst on board a U.S. Navy ship during the Revolutionary War. In his diary, Adams describes the emotional moment and considers the negative impact this amputation will have on Barron's family because it may leave him unable to work and support his family. (Records indicate Lt. Barron died from his wounds less than two weeks after this diary entry.)

Spelling and punctuation have been standardized for clarity.



"Mr. Barron, our first Lieutenant, attempting to fire a Gun as a Signal to the French **Brig**, the Cannon burst, and tore in pieces the right leg of this worthy officer so that the Surgeon was obliged to amputate it, a little below the Knee. I was present at this afflicting Scene, and, together with Captain Tucker, held Mr. Barron in our Arms, while the Doctor put on the **Tourniquet** and cut off the Limb. Mr. Barron bore it with fortitude, but thought he should die, and his principal concern seemed to be for his family. I could not but think the fall of this officer, a great loss to the Public United States. His Prudence, moderation, Attention and Zeal were qualities much wanted in our Infant Navy. He was by Birth a Virginian. He said he had a Mother, a Wife and Children who were dependant on him and in **indigent** Circumstances, and **intreated** me to take care of his Family. I promised him, that as soon as I could write to America I would recommend his Family to the **Care of the Public as well as of Individuals**. I recollect to have done something of this: but the Scenes of distraction in which I was soon involved, I fear, prevented me from doing so much as I ought to have done, and I feel it, to this hour to be one of the omissions which I ought to regret."

Brig: ship

Tourniquet: a piece of cloth tied tightly around the leg to stop the loss of blood from a wound

Indigent: very poor / having no money

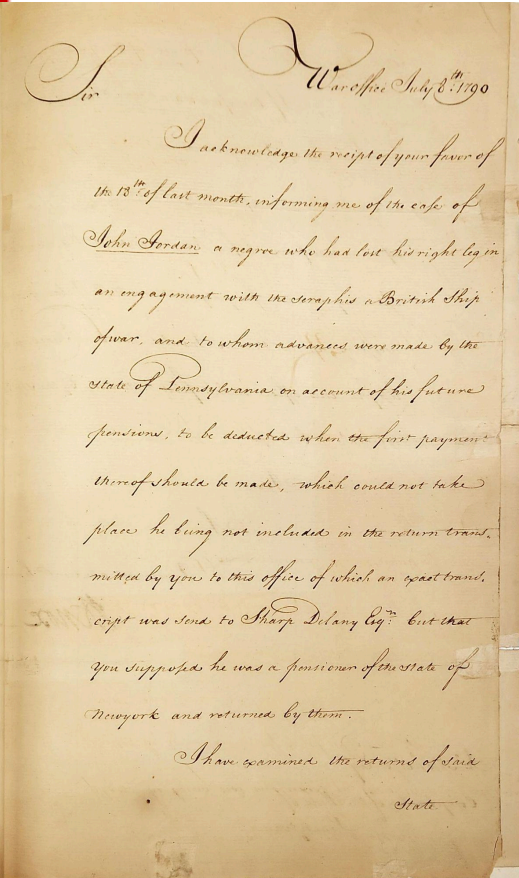
Care of the public as well as of individuals: Disabled people who could not work depended on their community—either family, friends, and neighbors, or the local poor house—to help care for them.

Revolutionary War: Disabled Veterans' Pensions

Context: In the years after the war, disabled Revolutionary War veterans applied for pensions. These regular payments were funded through the federal government and managed by the states in which those veterans lived. Veterans had to prove they had served and been wounded in battle, and demonstrate their need for financial support. Black, Indigenous and white veterans were all eligible for pensions, which indicates that the new federal government saw them all as worthy of the benefits of citizens.

Letter about a Pension: In this 1790 letter, U.S. Secretary of War Henry Knox writes to John Nicholson, comptroller of the state of Pennsylvania, regarding a pension for John Jordan, a Black man who lost his right leg while serving in the U.S. Navy during the Revolutionary War. Jordan had applied for a pension in Pennsylvania, but this letter reveals that he was not on that state's list of pension recipients.

The following letter has been modified for clarity. [Read the original.](#)



War Office July 8th, 1790

Sir,

I received your letter written on June 13, informing me of the case of John Jordan, a Black man, who had lost his right leg in an engagement with the Seraphis, a British warship... Mr. Jordan was not included on the list you sent of men from Pennsylvania who served in the war and had their pension applications approved by my office. You think he may have residency in New York, and is on a list of veterans set to receive pensions in that state.

I have examined the lists submitted by New York, but I do not find a person of Jordan's description. If therefore, John Jordan, a Black man, is a resident of Pennsylvania entitled to a pension according to the **Resolves of Congress**, he should be added to the Pennsylvania pensions lists before I can submit his name for payments, as it is a regulation that no **Invalid** can be included in a list from the U.S. War Office unless his name is first submitted by the state where he has residency.

I am, Sir, Your most obedient servant,
Henry Knox

Invalid: someone who is sick or disabled and unable to care for themselves

Resolves of Congress: After the Revolutionary War, states and the new federal government decided to provide pensions to soldiers who had participated in the war, and become disabled during their service.

Questions for Discussion

Spectacles belonging to Samuel Dexter, circa 1785

- Do you typically think of eyeglasses as something that someone with a disability would wear? Why or why not?

John Adams' eyesight

- What does John Adams need eyeglasses for? How will they benefit his daily life?
- What is John Adams saying about how we might perceive someone who wears glasses?

Asthma: Phillis Wheatley Writes discusses her health in a 1773 letter to her friend

- Phillis says that she has been "visited" by asthma. Do you think she considers her asthma as temporary or permanent? How might it have affected her?

Epilepsy: Edmund Quincy jots down a medical recipe for his son-in-law

- What exactly is this cure asking the patient to do? Why might a judge be the one giving this information and advice, rather than a doctor?

Received into the Almshouse by the order of the Boston Overseers of the Poor:

- What do you notice about the people in this list? Who might have received different treatment from the others? Why might they have been treated differently?
- Maybe a connecting question here: how might society have viewed these people differently than people like John Adams, who needed glasses? Why was this?

Enslavement: Liberation ads & disability

- What does it tell us about Tom that he had difficulty with both of his feet, but still managed to escape? How do you think he freed himself?

Revolutionary War: Surgeon's Kit used for amputations

- What is John Adams saying here about amputation? Does it seem to help the patients or hurt them?

Revolutionary War: John Adams witnesses an amputation

- Why would this person facing amputation be concerned about their family? What does that tell us about how amputees' lives were affected after they became disabled?

Revolutionary War: Disabled Veterans' Pensions

- Why was Mr. Jordan not included on the list of pensions? Why was it so important that he have these benefits? What could they do to help him?

Citations

- **Source 1: Spectacles**
 - Spectacles belonging to Samuel Dexter, circa 1785, Spectacles folded: 3.5 cm H x 11.5 cm W x 1 cm D, Massachusetts Historical Society, www.masshist.org/database/2511
 - Quote from: Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, Baltimore, MD, 17 February 1777, Adams Papers Digital Edition, Massachusetts Historical Society, <https://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/A-DMS-04-02-02-0119#sn=1>
- **Source 2: Asthma**
 - Letter from Phillis Wheatley to Obour Tanner, 30 October 1773, Massachusetts Historical Society, www.masshist.org/database/774
 - Asthma remedy: Memorandum book, 1776-1778, Image 88, Coolidge Collection of Thomas Jefferson manuscripts, 1705-1827, Massachusetts Historical Society, https://www.masshist.org/collection-guides/digitized/fa0031/memo_1776-1778#88
- **Source 3: Epilepsy**
 - Edmund Quincy journals, 1784-1785, Massachusetts Historical Society
- **Source 4: Admission records to the Boston Almshouse**
 - Register of admissions to the almshouse, 12 December 1768 - 30 September 1788, Almshouse records, 1735-1911, Boston Overseers of the Poor Records, 1733-1925, Massachusetts Historical Society, <https://www.masshist.org/collection-guides/digitized/fa0144/b09-f03#1>
 - Map: *The Town of Boston in New England by Capt. John Bonner, 1722. Aetatis Suae 60*, Facsimile map by George Smith after map by John Bonner, 48 cm x 66 cm, Boston: George G. Smith, 1835, This is a facsimile of the map engraved and printed by Francis Dewing, Boston, 1725, Massachusetts Historical Society, www.masshist.org/database/1733
- **Source 5: Self-liberation newspaper ad**
 - Runaway slave ad about Tom, *The Boston-Gazette and Country Journal*, 3 October 1774, the Annotated Newspapers of Harbottle Dorr, Massachusetts Historical Society, <https://www.masshist.org/dorr/volume/4/sequence/671>
 - The other two newspaper ads Simeon Polley submitted to Boston newspapers about Tom are:

- [The Annotated Newspapers of Harbottle Dorr: The Boston-Gazette, and Country Journal, 30 March 1767 \(masshist.org\)](#)
- [The Annotated Newspapers of Harbottle Dorr: The Boston-Gazette, and Country Journal, 20 December 1773 \(masshist.org\)](#)
- **Source 6: surgeon's kit and quote**
 - Surgeon's kit used by William Swift, MD, U.S.N., during the war of 1812, Massachusetts Historical Society, www.masshist.org/database/2221
 - Quote: Letter from John Adams to Samuel Cooper, Philadelphia, PA 9 June 1776, Adams Papers Digital Edition, Massachusetts Historical Society, <https://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/A/DMS-06-04-02-0108#sn=0>
- **Source 7: John Adams witnesses an amputation**
 - Diary of John Adams, Volume 4, 10 March 1778, Adams Papers Digital Edition, Massachusetts Historical Society, <https://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/A/DMS-01-04-02-0001-0023>
- **Source 8: John Jordan's Revolutionary War pension**
 - Letter from Henry Knox to John Nicholson, 8 July 1790, Massachusetts Historical Society