

Charles River Museum

When Waltham Strikes

The Power of Protest

Lesson Overview: What is the historic importance of strikes and other forms of protest in the industrialized world? This lesson plan connects the history shared in *When Waltham Strikes* with the United States' long legacy of activism. Participants split into groups to research several different strikes and protest to demonstrate the similarities and impacts these events have had from 1821 up until today.

Big Idea: Strikes and protests often share similar motivations and have the ability to create change that benefits society.

Length of Time Required: 2 hours

Grade Level: 8th Grade and up

Subject Area: Social Studies

Materials/Equipment Needed: White board or other large surface to write on, access to computers, one provided worksheet per group of students, writing utensils, provided slide deck, way to display said slide deck. If students do not have access to computers to research, relevant books can be used to obtain similar information.

Preparation Required: Print out worksheets, choose research topics, splitting participants into groups ahead of time may be helpful.

Lesson Objectives

1. Understand the Boston Manufacturing Strike of 1821 as the beginning of a long and continuous practice of protest in the United States.
2. Practice historic research skills
3. Present gathered information to a group of peers
4. Gain familiarity with some of the positive reforms that can be attributed to moments of protest.

Background for Educator:

The first industrialized labor strike took place at the Boston Manufacturing Company in 1821. The Boston Manufacturing Company (BMC) was founded by Francis Cabot Lowell and other wealthy New Englanders who are often referred to as the Boston Associates in 1813. It was the first fully integrated factory in the world. The first place where raw goods were turned into finished, market-ready products in a singular

location. This advanced the American Industrial Revolution to the type of production we associate it with today.

The BMC relied on the labor of young, unmarried women living throughout New England. They were an impermanent workforce, often living in company-provided housing and working on the factory floor for just a few years before returning to their rural communities to start families.

According to a letter written by BMC mechanist Isaac Markham, in 1821, The BMC slashed the wages of all single men working at the factory with little warning. “The same strike was played off on the girls but they as one revolted and the work stopped two days in consequence.” This is the only record we have of the first industrialized labor strike in the United States. Unfortunately, the payroll records that contain the wages in the months leading up to and directly after the strike have *mysteriously* gone missing. We do know that one of the highest paid workers before the strike was named Mary Melvin. She was paid \$28.08 on February 10th, 1821. There are no known pay entries until September 8th, 1821 where she made a total of \$6.64. Other women saw significant but less drastic pay cuts. We can assume that their strike was unsuccessful. Nonetheless, there is great importance in the fact that these women banded together “as one” to protest against the powers that be in their newly industrialized world.

We invite you to look at this historic event as the beginning of a long tradition of “as one revolt[ing]” in the hopes of a better society.

Instructional Steps

1. Introduction (15 mins)
 - a. Share with participants what they will be doing as part of this lesson plan
 - Learning about the BMC strike of 1821, conducting research in groups, sharing with the class
 - b. Ask participants to define what a “strike” and “protest” are
 - Ex. A strike is a collective work stoppage staged by employees to pressure employers into meeting their demands (often better pay, work conditions, benefits, etc.)
 - Ex. A protest is a public act expression of objection, disapproval, or dissent.
 - c. Discuss the similarities and differences between the two, have participants come up with examples (The Boston Tea Party, The Sit-In Movement)
 - The aim is to establish that a strike is a form of protest. Protests can also be boycotts, marches, occupations, and more.
2. Lecture (Can be skipped if attending *When Waltham Strikes*) (20 mins)
 - a. Share the [Power of Protest Slidedeck](#) or your own lecture material to discuss the history of the 1821 BMC strike

- b. Conclude by previewing several of the countless other strikes and protests that have taken place since 1821.
3. Break into Groups (5 mins)
 - a. Split the class into several small groups. Assign each group a historic protest.
 - These can be from the lists provided at the end of the slidedeck or historic events of your choosing.
 - b. Inform the class that they will have 30 minutes to research their historic event. At the end of the period they will share with the class. Encourage them to organize their thoughts on the provided worksheet.
 - c. Pass out one of the provided worksheets for each group
4. Research (30 mins)
 - a. Students are given 30 minutes to research their topic. This can be done on the internet or, with relevant reading material.
 - b. While the students are researching the instructor should write three headings on the whiteboard with lots of room underneath each. They should read "CAUSES," "EFFECTS," and "CENTRAL THEMES"
 - c. Towards the end of the time period, ask participants to choose one person to share their information with their peers and one to write on the board.
5. Present (30 mins)
 - a. Ask the participants to recall the causes, effects, and central themes of the 1821 BMC strike. Write the answers under each heading to demonstrate how participants will be recording information.
 - Ex. Cause - unexpected wage cuts. Effects - unified work stoppage is now seen as a potential avenue of future protest, unknown, etc. Central Themes - Unity, Women's Activism, Fair Pay
 - b. Group speakers take turns sharing the information they found while the writer records the central causes, effects, and central themes on the board.
6. Conclude (15 mins)
 - a. Reflect on the information gathered on the board. Ask students to discuss the similarities, gains, and patterns of protest we can see from 1821 to today.

Curriculum Standards Met: Massachusetts Dept of Education

HSS.8.T4.12

HSS.US1.T3.2e

HSS.US1.T4.2d

HSS.US1.T6.3

HSS.US1.T7.3-4

RCA-H.10

WCA.7-8

SLCA.5

Sources Used

Primary

Boston Manufacturing Company records, 1813-1930 (inclusive). Volume 1 & 2. Mss:442 1813-1930. Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School.v.1
Stockholders' records, February 23, 1813- December 23, 1874, 1820.

Boston Manufacturing Company records, 1813-1930 (inclusive). Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School. V. 81-84 Pay Ledger, May 24, 1817- Feb 23, 1821.

Isaac Markham to David K. Markham, 1821. Markham Family Papers, Sheldon Museum, Middlebury, Vermont.

Secondary

Gonzales, Lois Bayer. "Female Millworkers and the Mechanization of Textile Production: The Boston Manufacturing Company of Waltham, Massachusetts, 1813 to 1822." (1995). https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/amst_etds/57

Porter, David M. "The Waltham System and Early American Textile Costs Accounting 1813-1848." *The Accounting Historians Journal* 7, no. 1 (1980): 1–15.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40697632>.

Exhibitions

"Mill Girls: A Modern Labor Force," *The Charles River Museum of Industry and Innovation*. Waltham, MA. 2024.

"The Boston Associates; America's First Industrial Dynasty," *The Charles River Museum of Industry and Innovation*. Waltham, MA. 2024.

"The Boston Manufacturing Company," *The Charles River Museum of Industry and Innovation*, Waltham MA. 2024.

"The Mill at the Falls: The Evolution of the First Modern Factory," *The Charles River Museum of Industry and Innovation*. Waltham, MA. 2024.

When Waltham Strikes
Power of Protest Work Sheet

Protest _____

Date(s) _____

Location _____

What caused this movement?

What happened? (Key Players, Events, Etc.)

What were the effects?

What can this tell us about the history of the United States?