

Teaching Guide:

Thomas Polk in Revolutionary Charlotte

Note for Teachers:

This is the Teaching Guide for the Thomas Polk in Revolutionary Charlotte Case Study:
museumofthenewsouth.org/schools/thomas-polk-in-revolutionary-war-charlotte/

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Background Information

The American Revolution (1775-1783) stemmed from the tyranny of King George III against colonial America. North Carolina was one of thirteen original colonies that participated in the events leading up to war, as well as the war itself. Before that, North Carolinians had maintained a strained yet loyal allegiance to Great Britain. In the summer of 1775, the region's Third Provincial Congress enlisted North Carolina's first soldiers in the Continental Army and developed a Council of Safety to facilitate the colony's resistance to Great Britain. In April 1776, the Fourth Provincial Congress passed the Halifax Resolves, which officially declared support for independence from Great Britain. North Carolina representatives presented the Resolves to the Continental Congress on May 27, and within two months, North Carolina representatives to the Continental Congress signed the Declaration of Independence, officially breaking away from Great Britain. Although the Charlotte-Mecklenburg region was still developing, several key events and battles occurred throughout the area. In these events, one North Carolinian name appears throughout the historical records of these events and alongside General (and future first president) George Washington: Thomas Polk.

Born in Pennsylvania, Thomas Polk later moved to North Carolina as a young man, where he started a family and quickly became popular in the local community of Anson County. In 1765, he led settlers in the War on Sugar Creek, a local, sometimes violent, movement around disputed property rights. Soon after, Polk became a strong advocate for the founding of Mecklenburg County and the town of Charlotte, and because of his involvement in its establishment, he emerged as a leader in the community. Polk became a justice of the peace for the county, a commissioner, and the first treasurer for the town. He later served as a captain of the local militia, at which point he aided Governor William Tryon in his expedition against the Regulators, a group of western North Carolinians rebelling against what they believed were unfair taxation and governance implemented by royal officials. Later, in 1772, Polk was employed as surveyor to help establish the state boundary between North and South Carolina.

When the time came, Thomas Polk was active during the crisis of the Revolutionary War, across North Carolina and the colonies. He was actively involved in shaping the public opinion about colonial grievances and creating the Mecklenburg Resolves of May 1775. Published and widely circulated in North Carolina in June 1776, the Resolves were a radical set of resolutions that denied Parliament any power over the colony, instead allocating that authority to the Provincial Congress. The Resolves outlined several basic principles for governance, including the idea that anyone who worked for or with the British crown was to be considered an "enemy to his country". The local militia was empowered to arm itself and maintain vigilance as a way to protect the colony from British authority. Thanks to the leadership and influence of Polk, these Resolves inspired similar actions in cities across North Carolina.

Later, Polk was appointed as colonel of the Fourth North Carolina Continental Regiment, and in this role, he led troops to support the main army of General George Washington at Valley Forge, PA. Polk and his troops passionately resisted British troops when they invaded North Carolina, and he often pledged his own credit in securing supplies. In 1781, he was appointed brigadier general by General Nathaniel Greene. In the years after the war, Polk was elected to the Council of State, and as a delegate to the Continental Congress. He was also a promoter and trustee for Queen's College. He remained in the Charlotte area, purchasing land and becoming one of the area's largest slaveholders by enslaving forty-seven African Americans, which set him apart among Charlotteans as an elite and powerful man. Investing in human property accumulated wealth and privilege for his family at the expense of those enslaved people, and that wealth would be passed onto his descendants. He also hosted President George Washington in 1791 as he toured southern American states. Polk died at his home in Charlotte in 1794.

This case study is designed to allow students to compare and contrast primary sources to understand the complex legacy of a local Revolutionary actor. At times, Thomas Polk's actions were vital to the success and evolution of the city of Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, and the American Revolution. At other moments, his actions stood in direct contrast to the philosophies or success of the Continental Army and the establishment of the United States. Teachers are encouraged to read the source notes carefully to determine the angle of the source so as to best guide students through the comparative analysis of each source. It is also recommended that this case study be used within a broader unit about the American Revolution. Students will need context of key events and individuals, an overview or timeline of major events during the war, and a general understanding of the founding of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. Information to support this contextualization can be found at NCPedia.org:

- [North Carolina in the U.S. Revolution](#)
- [The American Revolution](#)
- [Polk, Thomas](#)

Activity Instructions and Rubrics

Museum Display

In this activity, students will reflect on their investigation of sources in an effort to synthesize information from across texts to answer the compelling question of the case study: What is the legacy of Revolutionary Thomas Polk? Students should first try to establish a possible thesis statement or opinion based on what they have already analyzed in the sources. Then, students should collect and evaluate evidence, refining their thesis statement as needed. Prior to sending students off to work individually or in small groups, model for students the categorization of evidence from one source. Ask students to consider what the source says, how it portrays Thomas Polk, and ultimately how the information reflects his legacy. The level of detail used to record evidence during this process is at the teacher's discretion; however, students will use the collected evidence to answer the compelling question, so it should be relatively robust.

After establishing a clear answer to the compelling question, students will design a museum display using materials of their choice that reflects Polk's legacy and impact on Charlotte and the nation. Students should be able to use symbolism and creativity to this end. Finally, students can prepare a museum label that describes the display's design and his legacy.

Modification: Students can write or record only the museum label or outline their thinking about Polk's legacy.

Extension: Write a letter to a local museum that explains why you think your display on Thomas Polk should be installed. Students should cite sources from which they gathered evidence.

Interview

Students will imagine it is the year 1790, and they have just read in the newspaper that George Washington visited North Carolina and made a stop at Thomas Polk's home. Students will pretend to be authors writing a book on the history of the Carolinas. For a chapter they will title, "The Life and Times of Thomas Polk", they have been granted an interview by Polk and must prepare.

Students should create five to eight interview questions for Thomas Polk concerning his contributions to North Carolina and provide possible responses to the questions. For the questions and responses, they should refer back to the case study Student Background and

source readings for creative ideas. They should cite the source number they were inspired by for each question and possible response. An optional organization worksheet is included or they may use their own paper.

Modification: Students can write three to five interview questions and responses based on their understanding of the sources.

Extension: Students can act out their interview with a peer and optionally record a podcast or video of the interview. Students should cite the sources from which they gathered evidence.

Cemetery Plaque

Thomas Polk and several other early citizens of Charlotte are buried in the city's Old Settlers' Cemetery. Students will create a new version of the plaque that mentions the enslaved people who are buried there. They should take a virtual tour on the cemetery's [website](#) and zoom in on the list of buried individuals. Then have them research members of the Polk, Caldwell, and Davidson families on the list to find out as much as possible about the people they enslaved. Finally, they will design a new updated plaque to honor those enslaved by the families and provide more information about them. Their final version of the plaque should either be drawn on paper or created digitally.

Modification: After exploring the website, have students research just one of the families listed before creating their plaque.

Extension: Students can imagine they are submitting their plaque idea to the city of Charlotte. Have them write a letter summarizing their research and explaining why they believe it's important for the plaque to be updated.

Thomas Polk in Revolutionary War Charlotte: Interview

| Question for Thomas Polk | Possible Response | Source #(s) Inspiration |
|--|---|-------------------------|
| Mr. Polk, how well do you know President Washington? | I have known the President a long time. He was a great general and I served alongside him throughout the Revolutionary War. I remember when he asked me to deliver supplies to the men at Valley Forge. The men were starving and needed shoes. He was very glad to see me! | 3 |
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Student Objectives

1. Students will be able to analyze primary source documents and collect evidence that reveals multiple perspectives around a historical event(s) or actor.
2. Students will be able to utilize evidence to establish and support a claim.
3. Students will be able to create their own questions and answers using references and/or text evidence.
4. Students will be able to compare and contrast two different opinions of a historical figure and justify their reasoning for their interpretations.

Relevant NC 8th Grade Social Studies Standards

- 8.I.1.5** Identify evidence that draws information from multiple perspectives.
- 8.I.1.6** Construct claims and counterclaims using evidence while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both based on multiple sources.
- 8.H.1** Understand the role of conflict and cooperation in the development of North Carolina and the nation.
- 8.H.2.2** Explain the influences of individuals and groups during times of innovation and change in North Carolina and the nation.