Historical Investigation

St. Michaels and the War of 1812: The Town that Fooled the British?

**Grade:** Grade 4  
**Topic:** The War of 1812  
**Duration:** 60 minutes (over 1-2 days)

**Objectives:** The purpose of this lesson is to exercise students’ ability to critically analyze and evaluate divergent historical sources to draw an evidence-based conclusion about a compelling question. While the lesson conveys important content about the experience of Maryland’s Eastern Shore during the War of 1812, the greater instructional emphasis should be on historical thinking skills, especially sourcing and corroboration.

*At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:*  
- Analyze how individual historical sources inform the compelling question  
- Evaluate the relative reliability of historical sources  
- Synthesize multiple historical sources to draw a conclusion about how the people of St. Michaels successfully defended their town from British attack  
- Develop a claim in response to the compelling question and support that claim with evidence drawn from multiple historical texts

**Maryland Content Standards:**  
5.C.2.a Describe Maryland’s role in the War of 1812.

**C3 Frameworks:**  
D2.His.10.3-5 Compare information provided by different historical sources about the past.  
D2.His.13.3-5 Use information about a historical source, including the maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose to judge the extent to which the source is useful for studying a particular topic.  
D2.His.15.3-5 Use evidence to develop a claim about the past.  
D4.1.3-5 Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources.

**Common Core State Standards for Literacy:**  
Rl.4.1 Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.  
Rl.4.2 Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.  
Rl.4.6 Compare and contrast a firsthand and secondhand account of the same event or topic; describe the differences in focus and the information provided.  
Rl.4.9 Integrate information from two texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.  
W.4.1 Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.
W.4.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Materials:

- Graphic Organizers (1 per student):
  - Analyzing Historical Sources
  - My Argument
- Primary Source Packet (at least 1 per student pair):
  - Sewell, Thomas H. *The Attack on St. Michael’s, Maryland, by the British, August ten, eighteen-thirteen*. 1913. PAM 1867. H. Furlong Baldwin Library, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland.

Procedure:

I. Engage the Students

- As a class or individually, read *The Boy Who Saved the Town*, by Brenda, or *The Town that Fooled the British*, by Lisa Papp.
- Ask students to summarize the story by identifying the 5 W’s.

*The Boy Who Saved the Town*

- **Where** does this story take place?
  - St. Michaels, Eastern Shore of Maryland, along the Chesapeake Bay
- **When** does the story take place?
  - August 1813 during the War of 1812 against Great Britain
- **Who** does the story involve? Who is the protagonist? Who is the antagonist?
  - Protagonist: Barnaby Sharpe, a boy from St. Michaels
  - Antagonist: the British Navy
- **What** does Barnaby do in this story?
  - He saves St. Michaels from being destroyed by a British attack by suggesting that they hang lanterns in the trees.
- **Why** does this plan work?
  - Because it is a dark, foggy, and rainy night, the British could not see exactly where the town was and just aimed for the lights.

*The Town that Fooled the British*

- **Where** does this story take place?
  - St. Michaels, Maryland, along the Chesapeake Bay

Educational materials developed by the Maryland Historical Society, 2014.
- **When** does the story take place?
  - summer 1813, during the War of 1812 against Great Britain

- **Who** does the story involve? Who is the protagonist? Who is the antagonist?
  - Protagonist: Henry Middle, a boy from St. Michaels
  - Antagonist: the British Navy

- **What** does Henry do in this story?
  - He saves St. Michaels from being destroyed by a British attack by suggesting that they hang lanterns in the trees.

- **Why** does this plan work?
  - Because it is a dark, foggy, and rainy night, the British could not see exactly where the town was and just aimed for the lights.

- If these details do not emerge on their own during the discussion, draw out that the story says that the Americans knew the attack was coming, made preparations to defend the town, including hanging lanterns in high places, and, as a result, the town was not damaged.

- Explain that St. Michaels is a real town in Talbot County, Maryland along the Chesapeake Bay. During the War of 1812, the British Navy attacked St. Michaels because the town was making ships that the Americans were using to fight the war. The British attack failed, which is a great source of pride for St. Michaels, which still calls itself “The Town that Fooled the British.”

- **Ask:** Is this book literature/fiction or informational text/non-fiction?
  - It is presented in the Author’s Note at the end of the book as fiction based on real events.
  - Discuss which parts of the story are presented as fiction and which parts are presented as fact.

- **Ask:** How much should we trust the information contained in a work of fiction to be historically accurate?

- **Ask:** How do we know what happened in the past? If you were going to write a story based on something that really happened long ago, how would you find that information about what happened?
  - You can look at historical sources.

- Introduce or remind students of the definitions of “primary source” and “secondary source.”
  - A primary source is a first-hand, or eyewitness, account of an event, person, or place. It is created by someone who was actually “there” to observe the event with his/her own senses.
  - A secondary source is an interpretation of an event, person, or place created by someone who was not “there” to observe the event personally but who has gathered information from primary sources and is using that evidence to determine what might have happened.

- Tell students that they will be exploring several primary and secondary sources about the British attack on St. Michaels to discover what really happened and determine how accurate this fictional account is.

- Present the compelling question: **What happened when the British attacked St. Michaels?**
II. Conduct the Investigation

Guided Practice
- Distribute the “Analyzing Historical Sources” graphic organizer and primary source packet to the students. Tell students that they will be reading several historical sources – some primary, some secondary -- to answer the question: *What happened when the British attacked St. Michaels?*
- As a class, analyze the “Letter from Easton, Maryland, dated August 12, 1813” to complete the graphic organizer for that source.
- Have students quickly review the original source but focus on the Modern Language translation of an excerpt.

Independent Practice
- Direct the students to work individually or in pairs to analyze the remaining two historical sources and complete their own copies of the graphic organizer.
- Tell students that they should pay careful attention to the similarities and differences among the various accounts and to the origins, or sources (date, author, purpose, etc.), of the accounts.

III. Discussions

- Reconvene as a class to complete a class copy of the “Analyzing Historical Sources” graphic organizer.
- Explain that usually not all historical sources on a given subject say exactly the same thing. Often there are important differences among the sources, and historians must try to figure out where the sources agree, where they disagree, and which accounts are more reliable, or trustworthy. This is a process that historians call corroboration of evidence. At the end of this process, historians can generate arguments or interpretations about what they think really happened in the past based on the best evidence they can find.
- Begin discussion of the compelling question (*What happened when the British attacked St. Michaels?*) by posing the following guiding questions:
  - On which points do the historical sources agree?
    - The attack happened about 4:00 a.m.
    - The weather was cloudy and/or foggy.
    - The British attack surprised the Americans.
    - The British landed on shore but were forced back to their ships by American gunfire.
    - The British bombarded St. Michaels from their ships using cannons.
    - The British eventually left as a result of the American gunfire.
    - No one in St. Michaels was hurt.
  - On which points is there disagreement?
    - The pamphlet says that the townspeople used lanterns to fool the British, but neither primary source mentions lanterns at all.
    - Both primary sources say that buildings in the town were damaged during the battle, but the pamphlet says that only 1 or 2 houses were hit.
- Explain that, when sources disagree, historians need to determine which sources are most reliable, or trustworthy, and which are not so that they can decide which evidence to give more weight to.
Explore the issue of the reliability of sources by posing the following guiding questions:

- How do you think the date that a source was created affects its reliability?
  - A source created long after an event MIGHT be less reliable than one created soon after an event, but this is not always the case.
- How do you think the purpose of a source, or why it was created, affects its reliability?
  - If a source was created to persuade, or convince, people of a particular point of view, it might be less reliable than one that was created as a simple report of what happened.
- What other factors do you think plays into a source’s reliability?
  - Students may provide many possibilities: how well the creator could see or hear the event, what his/her personal beliefs were, the creator’s age, whether the creator had a lot of information about what was going on or just one side of the story, etc.
- Which of the three historical sources we looked at seems MOST reliable? Why?
  - Allow for discussion, but guide students to understand that General Benson’s account on this topic is probably most reliable. He would have the most complete knowledge of the tactics the American militia used. He was writing soon after the event and providing a basic report. If he had pulled off such a brilliant trick, he probably would have been sure to write about it.
- Which of the three historical sources we looked at seems LEAST reliable? Why?
  - Allow for discussion, but guide students to understand that the pamphlet is likely least reliable. In this case, the purpose of the source (to celebrate a big event and make it special) and the date of creation (100 years after the battle) play important factors in assessing reliability.

IV. Report Findings

- Individually or in pairs, have students use the “My Argument” Graphic Organizer to develop an argument about the compelling question: What happened when the British attacked St. Michaels?
- Direct students to write an opinion piece in which they present a claim about what really happened when the British attacked St. Michaels, with emphasis on the use of the lanterns. Students should support their claims with at least three pieces of evidence drawn from the sources they examined and include some discussion about which sources are most reliable. (For added creativity, students could structure this opinion piece as a letter to the book’s author.)

V. Closure

- Have student volunteers share their arguments and evidence with the class.
- Ask: How accurate do you think the story we read is?
- Ask: Do we know for sure that the British did not use lanterns to fool the British?
  - It is possible that the townspeople did use the lanterns but that neither primary source account mentioned them.
  - It is, however, rather unlikely that such an important detail would have been left out of the official report of the general in charge, who would have known more than anyone else about the steps the Americans took to defeat the British.
  - It is more believable that someone writing a pamphlet to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the battle would have made up a really interesting story to make the battle sound more exciting.

Educational materials developed by the Maryland Historical Society, 2014.
➢ Discuss what students have learned about evaluating sources of information to learn about the past.
➢ Exit slip: Have students list 2 factors they should always keep in mind when reading historical sources to discover what happened long ago.
# ANALYZING HISTORICAL SOURCES: What happened when the British attacked St. Michaels?

**Directions:** Read each of the texts, and complete the chart below.

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<tr>
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<th>Letter from Easton</th>
<th>General’s Report</th>
<th>Pamphlet</th>
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<tr>
<td>When was the text created?</td>
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<td>Is it a primary or secondary source?</td>
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<td>Why did the author write the text?</td>
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<td>. . . whether the Americans used lanterns to fool the British?</td>
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- Which source do you trust the MOST? __________________________ Why? __________________________
- Which source do you trust the LEAST? __________________________ Why? __________________________

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Educational materials developed by the Maryland Historical Society, 2014.
MY ARGUMENT:

What happened when the British attacked St. Michaels?

I believe that ________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

Three pieces of evidence/reasoning that support my argument are:

(1) ________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

(2) ________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

(3) ________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________
Letter from Easton, Maryland, dated August 12, 1813

Extract of a letter from Easton dated Aug. 12, 1813

The enemy have taken a full possession of Kent Island and have fortified the narrows; their ships lie around the Island, several of them in the Eastern Bay and a brig has been up as high as Deep Water Point in Miles river.

Last Tuesday morning about 4 o’clock the British made an attack on St. Michael with eleven barges, they went up the river on the opposite side and came down on the side of St. Michael without making the least noise close in the shore, and, as it was very cloudy and our men in the Fort without suspicion of an attack, they had landed before they were discovered. Our men fired two guns and left the Fort of which the enemy immediately took possession and gave three cheers supposing they would have St. Michael without much difficulty, but they were very much mistaken for the St. Michael’s people and Captain Vickers of the Easton Packet, with the artillery from Easton attacked them so briskly and pointed their guns with so much judgment, that our invaders were soon obliged to make off—the infantry were not engaged.

There were only four pieces of cannon in the battery one of which our own people spiked before they left it, the other three were spiked by the enemy; but they have all been drilled and are again ready for service.

We were fortunate enough not to have a man hurt, although the grape shot flew like hail in the town and their balls went through a number of the houses. The two shots that were fired from the Fort must have done some execution as a good deal of blood was seen on the shore and two swords and a pistol were left behind, and their barges were seen to be struck by the artillerists from the town.

We expect every hour to hear of another attack on St. Michael, as I have no doubt but they will return with a larger force; they are however well prepared for them, two companies from Easton have been there for the last week, they have just been relieved and have returned home. Should the enemy succeed in taking St. Michael, we may expect a visit from them (at Easton) but having already met with so unexpected a repulse perhaps they may not venture again.

Modern Language

Last Tuesday morning about 4 o’clock the British made an attack on St. Michael with eleven flat-bottomed boats. They went up the river . . . without making the least noise close by the shore, and, because it was very cloudy and our men in the Fort did not suspect an attack, the British landed before they were discovered. Our men fired two guns and left the fort. The enemy immediately took possession and gave three cheers, thinking they would capture St. Michael without much difficulty, but they were very much mistaken. The St. Michael’s people and Captain Vickers of the Eastern militia, with the cannons from Easton, attacked them so quickly and pointed their guns with so much good judgment, that our invaders were soon forced to leave . . .

. . . We were fortunate enough not to have a man hurt, although the cannon shot flew like hail in the town, and their bullets passed through a number of houses. . .

http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=8dmKnIAIe1sC&dat=18130818&printsec=frontpage&hl=en
OFFICIAL ACCOUNT.

“The enemy with eleven flat-bottomed boats, made an attack on the little fort at the mouth of the harbor at St. Michaels, on Tuesday morning 10th of August, about one quarter before four o’clock, and under a dark cloud. They were not seen until they were landing. They were fired on by two American guns, and the men from the fort retreated, leaving behind their guns and cannons. The enemy broke the American cannons and got back on their ships and began firing their cannons on the town. There were 15 well-directed shots from our cannons, which made the enemy retreat. . . The militia generally behaved well . . . Some of the houses were damaged by cannon fire, but no injury to any human being . . .”

P. Benson, Brigadier General

Pamphlet Printed in 1913 for the 100th Anniversary of the Battle

Original Text

... Arriving at the shore... the troops began disembarking in the water... the garrison were taken by surprise, and before a gun had been fired by them, the greater portion were seized with panic, and throwing away their muskets, they made their way towards the town... But there were a few of the men who retained their courage, and determined to have one shot at the enemy...

... They [the British] fired two guns and then retired to a position in the river, from which they opened fire, which was continued with much vigor, though with little effect... Owing to the foggy condition and that to deceive the enemy the citizens had placed lights in the tops of the tallest trees and houses, the aim of the British was defective and they over-shot the town, although one or two houses were struck.

Modern Language

... Arriving at the shore, the British troops began getting out of their boats. The American soldiers were taken by surprise, and before they had fired a gun, most of them panicked and, throwing away their guns, made their way towards the town... But there were a few of the men who kept their courage and decided to have one shot at the enemy...

... The British fired two cannons and then returned to their ships in the river, from which they began firing cannons with much energy but causing little damage... Because it was foggy and because the citizens had placed lights in the tops of the tallest trees and houses to fool the enemy, the aim of the British was wrong and they shot over the town, although one or two houses were struck.

Source: Sewell, Thomas H. *The Attack on St. Michael’s, Maryland, by the British, August ten, eighteen-thirteen*. 1913. PAM 1867. H. Furlong Baldwin Library, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland.