



The Battles of New York: Leadership in the Face of Defeat

Time: 60–70 minutes

Grade Range: Upper elementary–middle school

Unit: American Revolution

Lesson Overview

This lesson examines the 1776 Battles of New York as a turning point in the American Revolution and focuses on leadership during crisis. Using a teacher-led PowerPoint as the anchor, students analyze British strategy, American defeats, and General George Washington's ability to hold the Continental Army together under nearly impossible circumstances. Students then deepen their understanding through an online article, an interactive exploration module, a scavenger hunt, and culminating reading comprehension activities.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Explain why New York was strategically important in 1776
 - Describe the major battles and movements of the New York campaign
 - Analyze George Washington's leadership during defeat and retreat
 - Demonstrate understanding through interactive and written assessments
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Materials

- **Battles of New York (1776) PowerPoint** (anchor)
 - Online article: **Battles of New York**
 - **Battles of New York Interactive Module**
 - Online or printable **scavenger hunt**
 - Reading comprehension exercises
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Hook Activity: What Makes a Good Leader? (10 minutes)

Begin with a class discussion:

Teacher Prompts:

- What qualities make someone a good leader?
- Is a leader only successful if they win?
- Can someone still be a good leader during failure?

Guide students toward the idea that leadership sometimes means **survival, persistence, and keeping people together**, even when circumstances seem hopeless. Introduce the idea that **George Washington's greatest achievement in 1776 was not winning battles, but keeping the army alive**.

Anchor Activity

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/revwar/ny.pptx>

Battles of New York PowerPoint (25–30 minutes)

Below is a **slide-by-slide teacher script** aligned directly to the presentation.

Slide 1 – Battles of New York (1776)

Teacher Script:

“This lesson focuses on the Battles of New York, one of the darkest moments of the American Revolution. Even though the Patriots lost most of these battles, what happened here shows us why leadership matters.”

Slide 2 – After Bunker Hill

Teacher Script:

“Although the British technically won at Bunker Hill, the victory was very costly. General William Howe believed the rebellion needed to be crushed quickly, and he chose New York as the place to do it.”

Slide 3 – British Strategy

Teacher Script:

“The British planned one of the largest invasions of the war. Thousands of British and German troops and a massive fleet were prepared to overwhelm the Americans.”

Slide 4 – American Preparations

Teacher Script:

“George Washington knew defending New York would be extremely difficult. The city was surrounded by water, and the Continental Army was smaller, poorly supplied, and inexperienced.”

Slide 5 – British Arrival

Teacher Script:

“When the British arrived, their numbers alone were intimidating. They landed on Staten Island and were joined by more reinforcements, creating an overwhelming force.”

Slide 6 – Battle of Brooklyn Heights

Teacher Script:

“In August 1776, the British attacked at Brooklyn Heights. They outflanked the American forces and nearly trapped Washington’s army.”

Slide 7 – American Retreat

Teacher Script:

“Instead of being destroyed, Washington ordered a risky nighttime retreat. Under cover of darkness, the army escaped to Manhattan—saving the revolution.”

Slide 8 – British Take Manhattan

Teacher Script:

“After peace talks failed, the British quickly captured Lower Manhattan. The Continental Army was forced to retreat north, avoiding direct destruction.”

Slide 9 – Harlem Heights and White Plains

Teacher Script:

“Washington fought small, delaying actions at Harlem Heights and White Plains. These were not victories, but they bought time and kept the army together.”

Slide 10 – Fort Washington

Teacher Script:

“Fort Washington was the last American stronghold in Manhattan. When it fell, nearly 3,000 Americans were captured—a devastating blow.”

Slide 11 – Prison Ships

Teacher Script:

“Captured soldiers were sent to prison ships, where disease and starvation killed most of them. This shows the true human cost of the campaign.”

Slide 12 – Fort Lee and Retreat

Teacher Script:

“Washington witnessed the fall of Fort Washington and immediately ordered a retreat from Fort Lee. His goal was no longer victory—it was survival.”

Slide 13 – Across the Delaware

Teacher Script:

“The army retreated across New Jersey and finally crossed the Delaware River into Pennsylvania. The revolution was on the brink of collapse.”

Slide 14 – Bleak Outlook

Teacher Script:

“Morale was low, enlistments were ending, and desertions were common. Even Washington doubted whether the army could survive.”

Slide 15 – British Winter Quarters**Teacher Script:**

“The British stopped fighting for the winter. This decision gave Washington the opportunity to regroup—setting the stage for a dramatic comeback.”

Guided Exploration: Article & Interactive Module (15–20 minutes)

<https://learnaboutamerica.com/american-history/revolutionary-war/battles-of-the-revolutionary-war/battles-of-new-york>

Students are directed to:

- Read the **Battles of New York online article**
- Explore the **interactive module**, examining battles, movements, and outcomes
- Complete the **online or printable scavenger hunt** to check understanding

Encourage students to focus on **how Washington’s decisions helped preserve the army**, even during defeat.

Culminating Activity: Reading Comprehension Exercises (15–20 minutes)

Students complete reading comprehension activities focused on:

- Main ideas and sequence of events
- Cause and effect
- Leadership and decision-making
- Historical significance of the New York campaign

[Battles of New York Online Comprehension](#) (Lexile 1200)

[Battles of New York Printable Reading Comprehension](#) (Lexile 1200)

Closure (5 minutes)

Return to the opening discussion:

Reflection Questions:

- Was Washington a good leader during the Battles of New York? Why or why not?
- How might the Revolution have ended if the army had been destroyed in 1776?

Emphasize that **leadership is often tested most during failure**, and Washington's ability to hold the army together made future victories possible.