

Old North Foundation

BELL RINGER'S AGREEMENT: READING A HISTORICAL DOCUMENT *Pre-visit Lesson Plan*

Learning Goal

The goal of this activity is to provide students with *experience* reading and deciphering a primary source document and to guide them through some of the unique issues these sources raise.

Resources

The following resources are needed to complete this lesson. All starred handouts, worksheets, images, etc. are available as a separate PDF file “Document Resources” on the Old North Foundation education website.

***Handout 1:** Bell Ringer’s Agreement

***Worksheet 1:** Reading A Document

***Image 1:** Old North Church

***Image 2:** Old North Bells

***Image 3:** Bell Ringer’s Agreement

Sound File 1: Old North Bells (*available on the Old North Foundation education website*)

Time

30 minutes to 1 hour, depending on how long you choose to spend on class discussion.

Procedure

- ① Before class, decide if you would like students to work on their own or with a partner and make one photocopy of **Handout 1** and **Worksheet 1** for each student or group. Determine how you will display **Images 1–3** for the class, as overhead images or projected with an LCD projector, and how to play **Sound File 1**.
- ② Begin the lesson by reminding the class that they will be going on a fieldtrip to the Old North Church in Boston. Display **Image 1**. Ask students if they remember why the Old North is famous and why they might be going there on a fieldtrip. Tell them that during this lesson they will learn a little bit more about the church’s famous steeple and how to read a primary source document, in preparation for their fieldtrip.
- ③ Display **Image 2** of Old North’s bells and briefly describe them to students. They are a special type of bell called change ringing bells. They were made in England and installed in the Old North in 1744. Instead of ringing songs, the eight bells—a “peal” of bells—are rung according to numerical patterns. The bells are very heavy and each one needs to be rung by one person—so it takes eight people to ring the bells. Play **Sound File 1**, a brief recording of Old North’s bells, to illustrate this unique method of bell ringing.
- ④ Divide students into their pairs (if you planned to) and distribute copies of **Handout 1** and **Worksheet 1** to each. Display **Image 3**, the Bell Ringer’s Agreement, for the class to see. Tell students that this is a historic document from the Old North Church’s archives. Use the document

to review the differences between a primary and secondary source, asking students to define the two and to decide which this specific document is.

A *primary source* is a document that provides first-hand testimony or direct evidence concerning a topic under investigation. Witnesses or recorders who experienced the events or conditions being documented create primary sources. A *secondary source* is a document that was written by someone who did not witness the event, but is pulling together evidence recorded by other people into their own description of the event. The Bell Ringer’s Agreement is a primary source.

- ⑤ Ask for a volunteer to read the document out loud (or you may want to read it yourself). It is transcribed on the right-hand side of the handout to make it easier to read and understand. Then either work together as a class and use the worksheet to guide a discussion about the document or have the students work on completing their worksheet on their own and then discuss as a class. The worksheet is not specific to the Bell Ringer’s Agreement, but asks general questions that are important to consider when working with a primary source. The following chart includes some possible answers and key discussion points:

(1) KIND	This document is a contract, or an agreement between two people or groups of people. Other kinds of documents include letters, wills, diaries, birth certificates, report cards, etc.
(2) HOW IT LOOKS	The paper is yellow-brown and torn; it is handwritten with brown ink; words are crossed-out and there are spelling mistakes; punctuation and capitalization is haphazard. What might all these things tell us about this document? It’s old.
(3) DATE	There is no date on the document. The overhead image of the document reads “c. 1750” which means “circa 1750.” Circa is a word that historians use to describe a document that they do not know the exact date of, but can make a good guess based on historical evidence. So, scholars believe this document was written sometime <i>around</i> 1750.
(4) AUTHOR	This document was written by the seven young men who signed the bottom; we’re not sure which one actually <i>wrote</i> the document, but it represents their commitment as a group to ringing the bells at the Old North. It is <i>always</i> important to try to identify the author or person who wrote a document; as we know everyone is unique and brings his or her own opinions and experience to a situation—including what we chose or chose not to record about it.
(5) AUDIENCE	This document was written for the vestry, or leaders, of the Old North Church to keep in their records and to be sure that the bell ringers did their job as outlined in the contract. It is good to try to determine the audience that a document was written for, or the people who are supposed to read it. If an author is trying to convince their audience of something—and they are smart—they will use their knowledge of this audience’s likes, dislikes, opinions, etc. to help persuade their audience to share their views.
(6) PURPOSE/ EVIDENCE	The purpose of this document is to establish an agreement between the seven signers and the vestry of the Old North Church where the young men would ring the bells at the church every week for two hours. Because eight people are needed to ring the bells, the document also describes how the bell ringing group will be organized and what penalties there are if a member of the group refused to uphold his end of the agreement.
(7) OF INTEREST	It is interesting to point out that the second signer of the document is Paul Revere. He did not attend services at the Old North Church, but clearly worked there as a bell ringer. He was probably around 15 years old when he signed the document. This document provides evidence that Paul Revere was very familiar with the steeple of the Old North Church and the clear view of Charlestown from the windows at its top.

- ⑥ Conclude the lesson by telling students to remember these important questions to think about when using a primary source to learn about the past. They will be looking at documents during their field trip to explore the mystery of who was responsible for displaying the lanterns in the window of Old North's steeple.

Resource Credits

Bell Ringer's Agreement, *document*: Old North Church (Christ Church in the City of Boston) records, Massachusetts Historical Society.

Old North Church, *image*: courtesy of Ann Beha Architects.

Old North Bells, *image*: courtesy of Ann Beha Architects.

Old North Bells, *sound file*: recorded by Henry Brugsch, courtesy of the MIT Guild of Bellringers.