

AMERICAN HISTORY PROGRAM IN A BOX

REVOLUTIONARY MUSIC & MESSAGES

SEND THE MESSAGE!

A 10-Minute America History Activity • Ages 3–18

How did people send a message before phones, radios, or loudspeakers?

Explore how fifes, drums, melodies, and songs helped people communicate, march together, build morale, and share ideas during the Revolutionary era.

Purpose of the Activity

How do you send a message to a large group of people when there are no phones, radios, or loudspeakers? During the American Revolution, fifes and drums were important military music and signaling instruments. Their sounds could carry across a camp or battlefield. Military music helped communicate commands, organize formations and routines, regulate marching, and maintain morale.

Young people were part of this story. The U.S. Army's history of the Continental Army notes that boys who followed the Army without their families could serve as fifers and drummers and help relay commands. Children and young people also contributed in other roles, including carrying messages and caring for animals.

This activity gives participants a short, hands-on experience of the communication problem. It also introduces a second idea: music could carry more than commands. Familiar melodies could carry feelings, political ideas, and new words.

What Participants Should Take Away

- Music was part of everyday life as well as military life.
- Drums could communicate simple, recognizable signals over distance.
- Fifes added melody and could be heard clearly over marching or other noise.
- Young people could serve as fifers and drummers and perform other useful jobs for an army.
- Familiar melodies could be given new words, allowing people to share new messages without inventing a new tune.
- Music could help transform a crowd of individuals into a group moving, listening, and remembering together.

Important Historical Note for the Leader

The drum signals in this activity are a modern simulation. They are NOT presented as authentic Revolutionary War drum codes. Historically, military music used standardized calls and signals. Here, children invent or learn a simple signal system so they can experience the challenge of communicating without spoken words.

Also, not every fifer or drummer was a small child. Military musicians included teenagers and young men. The activity uses the broader and historically supported idea that young people participated in the musical, communication, and support work of the Revolutionary-era armies.

At a Glance

Length	10 minutes
Age range	3–18; adapt the challenge by age
Best group size	Small group to large gathering
Core supplies	One drum or substitute
Optional	Rhythm instruments, kazoos, song lyrics, speaker/recording
Setting	Indoors or outdoors

Leader's Guide & Script

The following script is designed so a leader can lead the entire 10-minute activity with minimal preparation. Read the historical notes before the program; the words in shaded boxes may be read nearly verbatim.

Before the Activity

1. Choose a clear activity area where participants can hear the leader.
2. Place the drum or substitute where the leader can reach it easily.
3. For a large group, divide participants into teams of approximately 5–10 if helpful.
4. If adding a music portion, choose one familiar tune in advance. “Yankee Doodle” is an especially good choice.

1. Imagine the Problem — 2 minutes

“Let’s go back to the time of the American Revolution. Imagine that you are with an army. You need to tell a whole group of people what to do—but there are no cell phones, radios, or loudspeakers. How could you send a message?”

Take a few answers. Then continue:

“One answer was music. Fifes and drums could be heard over a distance and were used for military signals. And here’s something especially interesting: young people could be the musicians. Boys who followed the Continental Army sometimes served as fifers and drummers and helped relay commands.”

“Are you ready to become Revolutionary signal musicians?”

2. Learn the Signals — 2 minutes

“We are going to make our own simple signal system. These are our game signals—not actual Revolutionary War codes.”

Drumbeat	Our Message
ONE beat	ATTENTION!
TWO beats	GO!
THREE beats	STOP!

Practice each one together. Then call them out in a random order and see whether everyone responds correctly.

For very young children: use only two signals, such as one beat = “look at me” and two beats = “go.”

3. Send the Message! — 3 minutes

“Now I am going to become the signal drummer. I will not speak. Listen carefully and see if you can understand my message.”

- ONE beat → Everyone looks at the leader.
- TWO beats → Everyone takes three steps forward.
- THREE beats → Everyone freezes.

“Now let's see if one of you can send the message so everyone understands it.”

Invite one or two young participants to become the drummer. For older participants, increase the challenge by having the drummer stand farther away or by using a short sequence of signals.

4. Make Your Own Signal — 2 minutes

“Now you get to invent a signal of your own. Choose something you want your drumbeat to mean.”

- Come together!
- Victory!
- Form a line!
- Huddle!
- Cheer!
- Follow me!

Give participants about one minute to decide. Let one participant perform the signal while everyone else tries to figure out its meaning.

Older youth: create a three-signal system and teach it to the group.

5. Final Question — 1 minute

“Today you experienced something people had to do before modern communication. A signal had to be simple, loud enough to hear, and clear enough to understand.”

“During the Revolutionary War, young people could serve as fifers and drummers, helping communicate commands to the Army. Today, we used a drum to experience just a little bit of what that kind of communication might have felt like.”

“If you were a young fifer or drummer in 1776, what message would you want to send?”

Take two or three answers.

“Message received!”

Leader Background: Revolutionary Music & Messages

KEEP THIS PAGE WITH THE ACTIVITY. It provides the historical context behind what children are doing.

Why a Drum?

Drums were useful because their strong, rhythmic sound could carry over distance and through the noise of military activity. The Continental Army inherited a European military tradition in which standardized drumbeats communicated commands and regulated daily routines. During battle, different beats could help communicate orders when spoken commands were difficult to hear.

Why a Fife?

A fife was a small, high-pitched transverse flute. Fife and drum traditions were centuries old in European armies and became a staple of the American Army from the Revolutionary War through the nineteenth century. The U.S. Army notes that fifes were used not only for battlefield commands but also for formations, hours of duty, and morale. The fife supplied melody and a piercing sound that complemented the drum's rhythm.

The important distinction for this activity is that a fife melody was not necessarily a “song” with words. Military music could be functional—signals, marching, routines, and ceremonies—while songs served additional social and political purposes.

Why Songs and New Lyrics?

People in the eighteenth century were accustomed to reusing familiar melodies. A well-known tune could receive new words, allowing a new political or patriotic message to spread without requiring everyone to learn a new melody. The Library of Congress notes that familiar British melodies were used for revolutionary lyrics and that “Yankee Doodle” acquired verses that celebrated Americans and mocked the British.

Music therefore worked on several levels: it could communicate an instruction, regulate movement, build group identity, entertain, encourage participation, or carry an idea from one person to another by memory.

Young People in the Story

The U.S. Army's history of the Continental Army states that boys who followed the Army without their families performed as fifers and drummers to relay commands. Children also assisted the Army in other ways, including delivering messages and caring for animals. Military musicians were not all children—many were teenagers and young men—so the activity should present youth participation accurately without suggesting that all fifers and drummers were little boys.

A Wonderful Example: “Yankee Doodle”

“Yankee Doodle” was known in America before the Revolution and became strongly associated with the American cause. The Library of Congress describes it as an old marching air whose exact origins are uncertain. During the Revolution, Americans adopted the tune and added verses, including verses that mocked the British. It is an excellent example of how a familiar melody could become a vehicle for a new message.

A Yorktown Story—Use With a Caution

A famous story says that British troops played “The World Turned Upside Down” when they surrendered at Yorktown in 1781. This story is popular, but the evidence is poor. George Washington's Mount Vernon notes that the surrender terms specified that the British could march out with “British or German” music, and there is no reliable contemporary evidence that a march called “The World Turned Upside Down” was played.

This is a useful example of historical thinking: a memorable story can become famous without being proven. If you mention it to children, say that it is a famous story—not an established fact.

Optional Extensions

Use these only if you have additional time. The core activity remains 10 minutes.

Extension 1 — Fife Without a Fife

A real fife can be difficult for beginners. Use kazoos as a simple way to experience the idea of a melody-making instrument, or have participants hum the melody if no instruments are available.

5. Teach a short, easy melody by echo: leader hums/plays; group repeats.
6. Use “Yankee Doodle” or another familiar traditional/public-domain tune.
7. Let older children help lead the melody.
8. Keep volume and playing time comfortable.

“The fife did something the drum could not do: it gave the music a melody. But remember—military fife music was not always a song with words.”

Extension 2 — Songs Carry Messages

Explain that people could use familiar melodies for new words. Ask: “What message does this song give us?” Older youth can write one new four-line verse to a familiar tune. Younger children can choose three patriotic words and turn them into a chant.

“People didn’t need to invent a new melody every time they wanted to say something new. They already knew the tune. They could put new words to it—and suddenly an old tune could tell a new story.”

Extension 3 — “The Dance” and Yorktown

There is a documented Revolutionary-era example of new lyrics to a familiar melody: “The Dance,” a ballad printed in the Independent Ledger of Boston on December 31, 1781, to the tune of “Yankey Doodle.” It satirizes Cornwallis and the British defeat and mentions Greene, Lafayette, Rochambeau, and Washington.

This is a particularly good example of how music could carry political commentary. The tune was already familiar; the new words supplied the new message.

“The Dance” — Yorktown Satire

Printed in the Independent Ledger (Boston), December 31, 1781, “The Dance” was a ballad to the tune of “Yankey Doodle.” It turns the British defeat into a comic country dance. This is a documented contemporary example of the very idea at the heart of this activity: a familiar melody could carry a new message.

Opening lines:

*“Cornwallis led a country dance, / The like was never seen, sir, /
Much retrograde, and much advance, / And all with General Greene, sir.”*

The song goes on to mention Lafayette, Rochambeau, Washington, and Cornwallis’s surrender. The complete text is included in the original source material for this activity and can be used by leaders for older youth.

The Big Idea to Leave with Children

“The drum could send a command. The fife could carry a melody. And a song could carry an idea. Long before phones, people could use music to help a group listen, move, remember, laugh, and share a message.”

MESSAGE RECEIVED!

Supplies, Set-Up & Adaptations

Core Supplies

- One drum, if available.

No drum? Try:

- Small bucket
- Upside-down box
- Tabletop
- Two wooden spoons

Optional Supplies

- Rhythm sticks, wooden spoons, or other safe rhythm-makers
- Kazoos (one per participant) OR humming/whistling as a no-supply alternative
- Printed activity cards or a leader's list of simple signals
- Optional speaker/phone for a short recording of fife-and-drum music
- Printed lyrics for a public-domain patriotic or traditional song
- Paper and pencils/crayons for creating a patriotic song or message
- Optional small American flags or other patriotic props

Age Adaptations

Ages 3–6	Ages 7–12	Ages 13–18
Use two signals only. Emphasize listening and movement.	Use three signals and let children become signal drummers.	Create a multi-signal system; discuss how standardized signals reduce confusion.
Hum a familiar tune; ask what message a song can carry.	Try a new four-line verse or identify a song's message.	Compare a military signal, a marching tune, and a political song; discuss how each communicates differently.

Quick Leader Reminder

- Keep the activity moving—the point is experience, not a lecture.
- Always identify invented drum codes as a modern simulation.
- Use “could” and “sometimes” when discussing young people's roles; avoid implying every young person served as a musician.
- When discussing songs, distinguish instrumental military signals from songs with words.
- If using the Yorktown “World Turned Upside Down” story, present it as a famous but unproven story.

Historical Resources for Leaders

These resources provide reliable places to learn more, hear/see the music, and prepare future activities.

Resource	Why it is useful
U.S. Army Old Guard Fife and Drum Corps — “Fife”	Explains the fife as a military signaling instrument and its continuing American military tradition. https://fifeanddrum.army.mil/careers/fife/
U.S. Army Center of Military History — “The Continental Army”	Provides background on Continental Army organization, military musicians, battlefield communication, and the roles of children and other camp followers. https://history.army.mil/Revwar250/Continental-Soldier/
U.S. Army Old Guard Fife and Drum Corps — History	Background on the historical tradition of the Old Guard's fife and drum corps. https://fifeanddrum.army.mil/about/history/
Library of Congress — “Yankee Doodle”	Explores the song's origins, Revolutionary-era use, and changing lyrics. https://www.loc.gov/collections/patriotic-melodies/articles-and-essays/yankee-doodle/
Library of Congress — War and Conflict Songs	Explains how songs have functioned in wartime and includes important Revolutionary-era examples. https://www.loc.gov/collections/songs-of-america/articles-and-essays/historical-topics/war-and-conflict/
George Washington's Mount Vernon — “A March Allegedly Played at Yorktown”	A useful cautionary history of the “World Turned Upside Down” story and the evidence surrounding it. https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/colonial-music-institute/essays/a-march-allegedly-played-at-yorktown

Historical Sources Behind This Activity

The original activity draft drew on the U.S. Army, U.S. Army Old Guard Fife and Drum Corps, and Library of Congress resources. This revised version keeps those foundations while clarifying the distinction between military signaling, marching/ceremonial music, and songs used to communicate ideas.

Suggested Further Exploration

- Listen to a modern performance by the U.S. Army Old Guard Fife and Drum Corps and ask children what they notice about the sound.
- Compare a drum-only signal with a melody and ask which information each can communicate.
- Look at a Revolutionary-era song sheet and discuss why a familiar melody would be useful when sharing new lyrics.
- Use “The Dance” as an example of a new Yorktown message set to the familiar “Yankey Doodle” tune.
- Ask older youth to investigate the difference between a historical claim, a later tradition, and a documented primary source.

AMERICAN HISTORY PROGRAM IN A BOX

Children in the American Revolution

LET'S PLAY BINGO!

Purpose of the Activity

This Bingo game is designed to introduce children to the many ways young people contributed to the American Revolution. Through the game, participants will learn about specific roles children performed and about young people whose courage and service became part of the story of American independence.

The activity can be adapted for a wide range of ages. Younger children can concentrate on listening for the answer and finding it on their card, while older children can be encouraged to remember additional details about the people and their contributions.

Supplies

For the Leader

- Bingo cards — one for each participant, plus a few extras
- Caller's list of clues/descriptions
- Answer key for the caller
- Bingo markers for each participant
- Container for Bingo markers, if needed
- Pencils or pens, if participants will be writing on their cards
- Small prizes, if desired
- Timer or clock, if the activity needs to fit within a scheduled program

Bingo Markers

Markers can be anything small and easy to place on the Bingo squares, such as:

- Bingo chips
- Small pieces of paper
- Buttons
- Plastic counters
- Coins
- Small stickers

Tip: If the activity is being conducted with younger children, use larger markers that are easy to handle and difficult to lose.

Creating the Bingo Cards

The Bingo cards should contain the names of the people and the roles included in the Children in the American Revolution list.

Create enough cards so everyone will have one. Remember: Players need different combinations of answers; make sure you have enough different cards for the group. Print several extra cards in case someone needs a replacement.

Bingo cards can be created various ways including easily generated online using:

My Free Bingo Cards — Bingo Card Generator

<https://myfreebingocards.com/bingo-card-generator>

The leader can enter the names and roles from the Children in the American Revolution list and generate a set of cards.

Before Playing

Decide on a Bingo Patterns

Depending on the age and attention span of the group, the leader may choose:

- One horizontal row
- One vertical column
- One diagonal line
- Four corners
- Any five squares in a row
- Blackout Bingo — cover the entire card

For younger children, one row is usually a simple place to begin.

Making the Game Work for Different Ages

Younger Children

- Listening for the answer
- Matching the answer to the Bingo card
- Simple questions about the person's job
- Celebrating participation

Older Children

- Identify the answer before the clue is finished
- Remember the person's age
- Recall where the person lived
- Explain what the person did
- Identify whether the clue describes a role or a specific person

AMERICAN HISTORY PROGRAM IN A BOX

Children in the American Revolution

LET'S PLAY BINGO! – *Script*

Leader:

Two hundred and fifty years ago, America was fighting for independence.

When we think about the American Revolution, we often picture soldiers and generals—but there were many other people who helped the Patriots, including children.

Boys and girls who were too young to be soldiers often found other ways to help. They served as messengers, drummers, nurses, water carriers, scouts, farmers, and even spies. Some helped their families, some helped soldiers, and some took great risks to help the Patriot cause.

Many of these young people were overlooked by history because they were children. But their courage, hard work, and willingness to help were an important part of the story of the American Revolution.

This year, as our country celebrates its 250th anniversary, we have an opportunity to learn more about these young Americans and make sure their stories are remembered and shared.

Our theme is “Liberty’s Legacy.”

A legacy is something that is handed down from one generation to another. The children of the American Revolution left us a legacy of courage, service, and commitment to liberty.

Today, we are going to learn about some of these young people—and some of the important jobs that children did during the Revolution—by playing BINGO!

Here is how our game will work.

You each have a Bingo card with names of people and some of the roles children played during the American Revolution.

I will read you a clue or description. I will not tell you the answer right away.

Your job is to listen carefully and figure out who or what I am describing.

If the answer is on your Bingo card, cover that square with your marker.

Example

“Boys, about 9 to 12 years old, played a small instrument called a fife. The music could be heard over the noise of marching and battle and was used to help communicate commands.”

Who am I describing?

[Pause and let the children answer.]

That's right—a Fifer!

If you have Fifer on your card, cover that square.

Some clues will describe a job or role, such as a Fifer, Drummer, Messenger, Nurse, or Water Carrier. Other clues will describe a specific young person who lived during the Revolution.

So listen carefully! You may recognize an answer because of something the person did, where they lived, how old they were, or something courageous they accomplished.

And remember—there isn't a prize for knowing every answer right away. The important thing is to listen, learn, and discover the stories of these young people.

When you complete the Bingo pattern *[tell them the pattern you have chosen to use]* we are using today, call out:

“BINGO!”

Then we will check your answers together.

Are you ready to discover some of the young people who helped make American history?

Let's play BINGO!

AMERICAN HISTORY PROGRAM IN A BOX

Children in the American Revolution

LET'S PLAY BINGO! — *LIST AND ANSWERS*

Use this list as the caller's answer key. Read the description without giving the answer first, then allow participants to identify the person or role.

Roles

Fifer: Boys, 9 to 12 years old, who played a small, shrill flute called a fife. Because of its high frequency, the fife could project melodies clearly over the loud noises of battle or marching and was used for communication and signaling.

Drummer: Boys, 9 to 12 years old, who played a drum. Drummers helped keep soldiers in step while marching and laid down the beat for the fife. Drumbeats were also used to communicate commands and signal attacks or retreats.

Powder Monkey: Children who transported gunpowder around a naval ship because they were small enough to navigate tight, dangerous spaces.

Cannon Crew: Children who worked on artillery crews, including carrying water to cool cannons.

Messenger & Scout: Children who could move unnoticed by British troops and were used as couriers, slipping past enemy lines to deliver plans and supplies.

Farmers: With fathers and older brothers away at war, children were heavily relied upon to keep family farms, crops, and businesses running.

Camp Followers: Young girls worked alongside their mothers to sew uniforms, knit stockings, grow food, and tend to wounded soldiers.

Water Carriers: Boys and girls who carried water to soldiers and artillery crews.

Nurses and Hospital Helpers: Children who assisted wounded soldiers.

Blacksmith Apprentices: Children who helped repair weapons, horseshoes, wagons, and equipment.

Cartridge Rollers: Children who helped make paper cartridges for muskets.

Seamstresses: Children who repaired uniforms, blankets, and tents.

Stable Boys: Children who cared for horses used by cavalry and officers.

Boatmen and Ferry Helpers: Boys who assisted in transporting troops and supplies.

Lookouts: Children who watched for enemy movements and reported activity; British troops often paid little attention to children.

Supply Gatherers: Children who collected food, firewood, and materials for camps.

Young People

Andrew Jackson: At just 13 years old, Jackson served as a messenger for the South Carolina militia. He was later captured by the British and was slashed by an officer's sword for refusing to polish the officer's boots.

James Armistead Lafayette: A young enslaved African American who served as a crucial Patriot spy. He infiltrated British camps and provided Marquis de Lafayette with intelligence that helped the Patriot cause at Yorktown.

Christopher Seider: At just 11 years old, Seider was killed during a protest in Boston in 1770. His death inflamed colonial anger and became part of the events leading to the Boston Massacre.

Elizabeth "Betty" Zane: During the 1782 siege of Fort Henry, teenage Betty Zane volunteered to run through enemy gunfire to retrieve a keg of gunpowder from a nearby cabin, helping save the fort's defenders.

Daniel Applegate: A young fifer boy associated with Valley Forge.

Sybil Ludington: At 16, Ludington rode about 40 miles through Putnam County, New York, on April 26, 1777, to alert local militia to a British raid. Her ride helped rally about 400 men.

Caleb Stark: Son of General John Stark. At 16, he fought at Bunker Hill and later served at Trenton, Princeton, Ticonderoga, and Saratoga, among other battles.

Thomas Young: He joined the Revolutionary War in South Carolina as a teenager to avenge his brother's murder and survived multiple sword wounds at the Battle of Cowpens.

Deborah Sampson: A Massachusetts woman who disguised herself as a man to serve in the Continental Army.

Joseph Plumb Martin: At 15, Martin left Connecticut and joined the Continental Army in June 1776. He served until the end of the war and later wrote a detailed account of his experiences.

Peter Salem: An African American Continental Army soldier who served for nearly five years. Born enslaved in Framingham, Massachusetts, he was freed to enlist and is remembered for his heroism at Bunker Hill.

Dicey Langston: A teenage spy and scout in South Carolina. At 14, she ran five miles across the dangerously flooded Tyger River to warn her brothers of Loyalist troops, helping save Patriot soldiers.

Stephen Tainter: A Massachusetts militia drummer who endured the winter of 1776–1777 with his unit at the Continental Army's camp at Morristown, New Jersey.

Robert Steele: Joined the Continental Army as a drummer at about age 15 and served throughout the war. He is remembered for his early enlistment and musical leadership.

William Armistead: Enlisted as an underage drummer boy in Virginia and served with Continental forces, including during the Valley Forge campaign.

John George: At roughly 16 years old in 1776, he enlisted as a drummer boy in a Pennsylvania regiment.

Alexander Millener: An American Revolutionary War drummer boy remembered for serving under George Washington and later becoming one of the war's last surviving veterans.

Caller's note: The ages and descriptions above follow the accompanying American History BINGO activity supplied for this program.