Ben Franklin and the Paxton Massacre

**Age group:** High school (10-12)  
**Subject:** U.S. History/ A.P. U.S. History  
**Time required:** 1-2 periods

1. Have students research (either during or outside of class) the time period at the conclusion of the French and Indian War. Before they begin their research, assign each student one of three roles: an Indian, the governor of Pennsylvania, or a local settler in the western part of the state. For each role, consider the following questions:

   - What are the major issues and questions in your mind regarding settlements of colonists and Indians in western Pennsylvania (prior to the 1764 attacks)?

   - What do you feel would be the best way of resolving the above issues (prior to the 1764 attacks), and why?

   - As tensions increase and you grow frustrated in 1764, what questions do you have for the other two groups?

2. When students come to class the next day, begin a debate between the three groups, based on their responses to the above questions. (The debate takes place before the 1764 attacks.) Halfway through the debate, interrupt the discussion with news of the Paxton Massacre, as if it were a news bulletin. Continue the debate with each group discussing what its next action step will be. What fears do you now have? How will you address those fears? A few minutes later, announce another news bulletin that the Paxton Boys are marching towards Philadelphia. What is your response? Justify your actions at this point.

3. If time, show relevant sections from the DVD “Benjamin Franklin” (PBS)

4. That evening, have students read Franklin’s response to the Paxton Massacre. Students can use the following link:


   Have students respond in writing to the following questions:

   - Why did the Paxton Massacre upset Franklin so much?
   - What arguments did he make against the mob’s violent actions?
   - Although Franklin was a Deist, why did he include references to the Bible here?
   - What values of Franklin can you discern from his arguments here?
State standards and benchmarks addressed:

○ Describe the political, religious and economic aspects of North American colonization including:
  Interactions between American Indians and European settlers, including the agricultural and cultural exchanges, alliances and conflicts

○ Analyze how contact between white settlers and American Indians resulted in treaties, land acquisition and Indian removal.

○ Analyze how physical characteristics of the environment influenced population distribution, settlement patterns and economic activities in the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries.

○ Explain the impact of settlement, industrialization and transportation on the expansion of the United States.