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George Washington: Myth, Symbol, Reality  
NEH Summer Institute 2009 Final Project

### **Bringing the American Revolution to life:**

#### **Teaching American history in an Active, Hands-on Middle School classroom.**

For the majority of my academic career I learned by sitting down and dutifully listening to what a superior told me. This style of imparting knowledge worked fairly well in high school, college, and graduate school, but when I think back to my middle school years, there are pages of empty space in the book of my academic memory. During my tumultuous middle school years, my mind was filled not with the desire to learn but with fears of the popular girls making fun of me; hopes that I would be seated next to the boy I had a crush on in algebra class; sulking over a fight I had with my mother the night before; and desperately trying to figure out my identity. Knowing that these preoccupations, exacerbated by the use of text messages and Facebook, are also what occupy my students' minds means that it is going to take more than a lecture about the causes of the Boston Tea Party to engage them. As most teachers know, to get middle schoolers invested in anything they learn during the school day means getting them invested and involved in their own learning process. This concept is not my own in theory but at the root of my Coalition School's Ten Common Principles. (For more info, see [www.parker.org](http://www.parker.org), and specifically <http://www.parker.org/Learn%20More%20About%20Parker/The%20Ten%20Common%20Principles.pdf>).

So how do we truly get students invested in their own learning process? By minimizing the time we spend talking at them, and maximizing the time they spend doing hands-on, thought provoking work. In my first year of teaching my mentor teacher told me about the "15 minute rule." This rule, stated simply, is that after 15 minutes of talking any audience whether adult or child will have trouble staying focused. I try my best to follow this rule in my teaching and speak for no longer than 15 minutes and when I don't do it I pay the price of disengagement. The school I work at, F.W. Parker Charter, uses a project-based, collaboratively planned and executed curriculum in which 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders are in the same classroom. Because our school is project based we do not give formal tests to determine assessment, nor do we average our homework and quiz scores in order to determine grade. In fact, we do not even participate in the standard grading system of A-F grades; instead, the student earns a mark of Just Beginning, Approaches, or Meets Standards. Anything below a Meets is revisable.

In my past three years at Parker, I have learned that while there is no way a student will process, learn from, and remember everything we teach them, they have the best shot of doing so when they are both physically and intellectually involved. Another philosophy that my school and I myself personally subscribe to is the idea that if students are truly invested in the work they are doing, they will

begin to build on their critical thinking skills. In the practice of teaching history, it is tempting to emphasize facts, dates and details; however, as a learner myself, it was not the details that stuck with me but rather the greater issues of humanity that lay under the facts. My best attempt at authentically engaging my students in material can be seen through my goals for the following lesson plans. These are:

1) To get the students out of their seats and involved in hands-on lessons whenever possible.

2) To empower the students to use their own voices, ideas, and questions to engage in the material, as opposed to lecture-style dispensing of information.

3) To demonstrate multiple sides of George Washington and the Revolutionary period and begin debunking the simplified, romanticized or simply false notions students may already have.

Students at our school sit around tables and not in desks, which is why most of the lessons are written for small groups. I have found that the students in my classroom (and probably most classrooms) do better learning when they can share their knowledge and learn from each other as opposed to solely the teacher.

My thought process when creating these lessons went like this: first, I thought about what concept I wanted my students to learn. Then I thought about styles of activities in which I have seen true engagement. This past spring my co-teacher and I gave our students a survey about the classroom and curriculum. When asked “what types of lessons worked best for you as a learner?” they nearly unanimously answered “hands-on lessons” or “acting.” Whether this could be because these activities are simply more “fun” or just allow them to be more social with each other is irrelevant. What is most important is that they are engaged and invested in their own learning.

Some logistics about the lessons:

Our school has a block schedule, which means my class meets for two hours every day. However, the course I teach with my co-teacher is a combination of social studies, history, English/ literature, and art; therefore a typical day could be either the first 45 minutes spent on social studies, a break, followed by a lesson from a different discipline, or it could be one two hour block focused on two parts of a lesson. Therefore some of these lessons may need to be split or modified in order to fit into a standard 45 minute period. These lessons are written out with fairly explicit steps, but can easily be tweaked, modified, or extended as one sees fit. I did not design them to necessarily go in the order that they are in, or even consecutively. Most likely, I myself will modify these lessons based on the class dynamic, time frame, level of interest and learning styles, and many other factors. I encourage anyone using these lessons to do the same. A brief overview of the lessons is as follows:

### **Lesson 1: Understanding Causes and Effects of the Revolution.**

This lesson is centered on creating a timeline of events in a way that helps students understand the events and not simply memorize the dates. The trick of the lesson is that they work in small groups and compete with the other groups to try and line up the un-dated events in an order that makes the most sense. The hope is that they will use critical thinking skills to problem solve how events are connected.

### **Lesson 2: What Kind of Man was Washington?**

The goal of this lesson is to engage students by having them make guesses and predictions, and then see where they were right and wrong. The idea is that students will look at an actual piece of writing by Washington, (though they will not know who wrote it) and try to make inferences about what kind of person this might be. While they may be overwhelmed at first by the apparent inaccessibility of the writing, I believe with some direction and coaching they will look at it like a “clue” and not a piece of material they need to read and fully comprehend. The weight of their learning will come from the construction of George Washington done by the class, not the letter.

### **Lesson 3: The Rules of Civility**

In this lesson, students will look at and act out the infamous “Rules of Civility” that are said to have both influenced and reflected George Washington’s character and leadership. This lesson is designed to get students out of their seats and doing some creative acting. The hope is that the humor of the rules of civility will be a strong entry point for discussing some of values of the time. Because middle schoolers thrive when they can think about themselves, I have added a component to the lesson where they think of and act out ‘rules of civility’ for junior high/ today.

### **Lesson 4: Simulation of Players and Tensions leading up to the American Revolution**

This lesson is designed to allow students to role-play and simulate the situations and tensions between different groups of people before the Revolution. By adopting a specific character and attempting to complete an actual “task” as that character, students will get to see and feel for themselves the social dynamics and conflicts that lead up the American Revolution. These types of simulations have worked especially well when teaching about social dynamics between different groups of people in history.

### **Lesson 5: The Dilemma of Slavery**

This lesson uses bits and pieces of structure from the previous lessons including looking at primary sources and the creation of short skits. The goal of the lesson is for the class to examine some different perspectives on the issue of slavery and think about what each person may have had to gain or lose from the institution of slavery. My hope is that students will understand slavery during the revolution as a complex issue that, while not supported by all white citizens, was desirable by many for economic reasons even if those supporters did not agree with it morally.

## **Lesson #1: Understanding Causes and Effects of the American Revolution**

Goal: Students will think critically about how certain events surrounding the American Revolution affected other events. Students will develop a sense of order that is not reliant on their ability to memorize names and dates.

Objectives:

- 1) Students will think critically about cause and effect of events leading up to, during, and after the American Revolution.
- 2) Students will create a comprehensive timeline that orders events through the American Revolution.

Materials: Timeline events, written on separate pieces of paper. Pencils.

*\*\*\*Notes: I have attached the blurbs that I would like my students to consider (without dates) as well as a teacher key (with dates). For lessons like this, I usually cut the pieces up, and put them in an envelope. If there is not time to cut up all the blurbs, you can also just pass out the blurbs written up on one sheet in the wrong order and have the students cut them up themselves.*

*The important things I have found for middle schoolers is that there is some sort of physical piece (moving around pieces of paper as opposed to just labeling the order) and that there is some sort of motivating competition factor.*

Possible lesson steps:

Step 1) (about 10 minutes) (Optional) Begin class by asking students in small groups to brainstorm and jot down everything they already know about the colonial and the revolutionary period. After about 10 minutes, have the class share what they think they already know. You can do this one of two ways:

Either a) have a delegate from each group come up and jot down on the board some of the things they discussed or:

b) have a brief class discussion where students verbally share what they think they already know.

Step 2): Pass out event blurbs. (See \*\*\* below for my suggested event blurbs). Tell the students that there will be a competition between small groups to see who can put the events in the correct order first.

Students should first read each blurb and come up with a title, then begin the task of ordering the blurbs.

Step 3) At teacher's discretion, and depending on length of class period, class should come back together and put together the timeline in proper order. Actual dates can also be added. This can be done either temporarily on the chalk or whiteboard, or more permanently on paper, which can stay up in the classroom for the duration of the unit.

Possible homework assignment:

Choose 5 events from the timeline and either a) write out a 'prologue' or poem that outlines these events, or b) create a comic strip that represents these events and, if possible, how they affected each other.

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\*\*\*Here are the key event blurbs that I would like my students to think about critically. Of course it is possible to add, remove, or tweak any events you choose. Actual dates follow this list.

Event Blurbs in order (without dates)

The first permanent colony is established by the British as Jamestown, Virginia.

The British and the French fight against each other for conquered land in the colonies. Many Native Americans fought for the French. This is called the French and Indian War.

George Washington commands troops in the French and Indian war, and even though he made some mistakes, the British defeat the French. (1758)

Great Britain was facing huge debt from fighting the French.

To pay off all the money they owed or possibly to create future expenditures in the colonies, the British developed the "Stamp Act" which required colonists to pay very high taxes for things like trading and protection against the French. Many colonists were angered over the control Britain had of their money.

To keep an eye on the colonists and make sure they followed all the rules of the King, many British soldiers, or "Red Coats" were sent to live in the colonies and even in people's homes. (This is called the Quartering Act)

Boston Massacre- Some Boston residents taunt and threaten British soldiers with snowballs and blunt objects. Soldiers fire into the crowd killing five people including one child and one freed slave.

British soldiers march toward Lexington and Concord but are met by farmer soldiers who fire the "shot heard 'round the world" at the British. This adds to the building tension between England and colonists who want independence.

Representatives from each colony meet illegally to decide what to do about all the fighting. As a result, Thomas Jefferson drafts the Declaration of Independence. It is signed by all members of Congress even though they could risk death for going against the King.

Congress creates an official army, the Continental Army, that will fight against the British. George Washington is asked to lead the army.

George Washington has a lot of trouble leading the Continental Army because the colonies do not have enough weapons, bullets, food, etc and a lot of soldiers get sick, die, or leave the army.

Facing defeat, the British begin to leave the colonies. The war is 'won' by the colonists.

Each colony becomes a state and writes its own constitution. However, states start to argue with each other.

Congress decides the states need one constitution that unites them all instead of many constitutions. Voila, the United States of America!

Date Key:

- 1) Jamestown- 1607
- 2) French and Indian War: 1753-58
- 3) 1758
- 4) 1758-1765
- 5) March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1765
- 6) March 24, 1765
- 7) Boston Massacre: March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1770
- 8) Battle of Concord and Lexington: April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1775
- 9) Declaration of Independence: July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776
- 10) 1776
- 11) 1776-1783
- 12) 1783
- 13) 1783-87
- 14) 1787

## Lesson #2: What kind of man was Washington?

Goal: To draw the students into the material by having them do 'detective work' and start making some predictions.

This is very simple. 1) Choose a letter written by George Washington (see \* below for excerpt options) that you feel demonstrates his personality, leadership style, and values the most. Explain to the students that one of the best ways to find out what a person is like is to read things like their diary entries and letters. Don't tell them who wrote the letter you give them.

2) Provide them with a list of 'mysteries' they need to solve about this person.

Some of the prompts I will use are:

Who do you think this person is?

What are their personality traits?

Do they have a lot of education?

What kind of job do you think they do?

What is important to this person?

Would this person make a good leader? Why?

Would you want to talk to this person at a party? Why or why not?

3) Make a chart on the board with these categories and have a delegate from the group come to the board and write in answers as they go along.

4) You may want to read the letter aloud as a class before splitting off into group work.

5) After groups have filled out most categories on the board, end the class with a quick discussion and reveal who this person was.

Homework: Read the following summary of George Washington and his life:

<http://www.georgewashington.si.edu/kids/reading.html>

Circle every place your prediction was correct and put a small X next to any places that were the opposite of your predictions. (This could also be done at the end of class if time.)

\*Some letter excerpt options:

George Washington to Lund Washington, "I mean to have groves of Trees at each end of the dwelling House, that at the South end to range in a line from the South East Corner to Colo. Fairfax's, extending as low as another line from the Stable to the dry well, and towards the Coach House, Hen House, & Smoak House as far as it can go for a Lane to be left for Carriages to pass to, & from the Stable and Wharf. from the No. Et Corner of the other end of the House to range

so as to Shew the Barn &ca. in the Neck--from the point where the old Barn used to Stand to the No. Et Corner of the Smiths Shop, & from thence to the Servants Hall, leaveng a passage between the Quarter & Shop, and so East of the Spinning & Weaving House (as they used to be called) up to a Wood pile, & so into the yard between the Servts Hall & the House newly erected--these Trees to be Planted without any order or regularity (but pretty thick, as they can at any time be thin'd) and to consist that at the North end, of locusts altogether. & that at the South, of all the clever kind of Trees (especially flowering ones) that can be got, such as Crab apple, Poplar, Dogwood, Sasafra, Lawrel, Willow (especially yellow & Weeping Willow, twigs of which may be got from Philadelphia) and many others which I do not recollect at present--these to be interspersed here and there with ever greens such as Holly, Pine, and Cedar, also Ivy--to these may be added the Wild flowering Shrubs of the larger kind, such as the fringe Tree & several other kinds that might be mentioned.

Or: **To George William Fairfax** Mount Vernon 30th June 1785.

My Dr Sir,

When I wrote you in Feby last, I intended to have followed it with a letter of earlier

date than the present; but one cause succeeding another, has prevented it 'till now. I proceeded to a diligent search for the paper requested in your favor of the 23d of August last year, & after examining every bundle, & indeed despairing of success, it occurred to me that your Accot with Lord Fairfax might afford some clue by which a discovery of it might be made; & in looking in your ledger for an index, I found the receipts pasted on the cover of the Book. Having a call to Richmond the latter end of April, I took the receipts with me intending to leave them in the hands of the Attorney General; but it being his opinion there would be no occasion for them, I brought them back, & restored them to the place from whence I took them: the enclosed are copies of those receipts, which I meant should supply the place of the originals, had they pass'd from me to the Attorney.



### Lesson #3: Rules of Civility

#### Objectives:

- 1) To introduce students to primary sources.
- 2) To help students to consider daily values of the time period among the elite and how similar or different they are to their own daily values.
- 3) To think about what kind of person George Washington is: what might his values and personality have been, and what would be important to him in establishing a new government?

#### Materials: The Rules of Civility

#### Lesson steps:

- 1) Pass out "Rules of Civility" document. (For document or more extensive background information on it, refer to this page:  
<http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents/civility/index.html>)
- 2) Break class into small groups.
- 3) Assign a few rules to each group.
- 4) For each rule: Groups should translate what the meaning of the rule is, and plan a small skit that demonstrates the rule. (*\*something my kids love doing is acting out both the 'right' and 'wrong' way to do something- they find it very funny*)
- 5) Groups should also be told to create a few rules of civility that apply to teenagers today or simply people in today's society and act those out, as well.
- 6) After the acting portion of the lesson, have students either journal for a few minutes or discuss the following (or similar) prompts: a) what their guesses are about what kind of person George Washington was- what values were probably most important to him? b) what kind of government would he have wanted based on these social rules?

## **Lesson #4: Simulation of Players and Tensions leading up to the American Revolution**

Objective: For the students to engage in a hands-on activity that will give them a sense of the various positions and experiences during the revolutionary period.

2) For students to realize that there were a variety of perspectives on the revolution: not all colonists wanted to rebel against the King. Also to think about the roles of groups such as Native Americans and slaves.

How this simulation works:

Each student will be given a slip of paper with a 'role' on it. The role will tell them who they are and what their goal will be in the simulation. The teacher should create a 'task' that the students want to accomplish- for example, building the longest wall they can out of legos. The teacher is largely the 'facilitator' of this activity. The idea of the lesson is that the students will represent a player in the revolution and the kinds of challenges that player might have faced in accomplishing their 'task'.

Step 1) Delegate certain 'areas'- one area is Native American, one area is the colonies, and one area is Great Britain. Place a pile of legos in each area.

2) Pass out roles.

3) Act out simulation for about 10-15 minutes, stopping every few minutes to announce various changes such as taxes being paid to England, 3 colonists killed by Native Americans (and vice versa), British soldiers knocking over houses, etc.

4) When a stop time is called to the simulation, have a round table discussion using prompts such as these:

What was your goal during this simulation and what was most important to you?

What was most challenging/ frustrating in accomplishing these goals?

How much power did you feel you had?

What 'solution' would make your plight easier?

5) Homework assignment: Have the student write and illustrate a 'post card' to the King stating their position and desired outcome of the current situation.

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Roles: (You can give about 3 of each out to students)

British Parliament: You are a member of the British Parliament. Your goal is, when the teacher announces it, to demand lego pieces from the colonists.

Loyalists: You are loyal to the King of England. Your job is to collect 'taxes' from each colonist (5 legos) and then deliver them to England. You believe it is important

to be patriotic and support England. You talk trash to the loyalists accusing them of being traitors.

Federalists: You want to stand up for the rights of the colonies! Your job is both to try and build the BEST and STRONGEST lego wall around the colonies while at the same time, parading around trying to convince people why they should fight for independence from England! You also occasionally yell at the British Soldiers accusing them of bossing you around and stealing your jobs.

British Soldier in the Colonies: You have been sent by the King to “patrol” the colonies. Your job is to walk around looking important but every now and then destroy a small part of the wall.

Cherokee warriors: You are fighting on the side of the British because you don’t want your land taken away and have been given weapons and supplies. You are both trying to build up a wall around your territory and taking legos from the colonists. You have been given guns and weapons by the British and want to defend your territory.

Cherokee women and Elders: You don’t want your nation to engage in fighting because you think it will be bad for your people. You go around trying to convince the young men not to fight or accept gifts from the British.

Plantation owners/ political leaders: You are busy trying to instruct your slaves to build your part of the wall especially high, AND at the same time you are trying to talk with other political leaders about what to do.

Slaves: You have been separated from your family and are very upset and lonely but must continue working for your master every day. You will be assigned to work for one specific person.

Colonial Federalist women: you are doing your part by boycotting the goods that the British send over and make you pay taxes on. However, The Quartering Act says that you have to let British soldiers stay in your house and eat your food and you won’t get paid for it. You are angry with the British soldiers because they are loud, rowdy, rude, and eat all your food.

## Lesson # 5: The Dilemma of Slavery

Lesson Objectives:

- 1) For students to actively engage in critical thinking about the dilemma of slavery during the revolutionary period.
- 2) For students to learn a little bit more about the opinions of a few key players in the slavery controversy.
- 3) For students to begin looking at primary sources as a way to access historical knowledge.

Materials/ Resources:

Excerpts from: Chapter six, "African Americans" in *A People's History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence* by Ray Raphael.

"'That Species of Property': Washington's Role in the Controversy Over Slavery" in *George Washington Reconsidered* edited by Don Higginbotham.

Relevant website on slavery in Massachusetts:

<http://masshist.org/endofslavery/?queryID=54>

Slideshow of images of the anti-slavery movement in Massachusetts:

<http://www.masshist.org/online/abolition.cfm>

*Note: I will provide below a few different options this lesson could be presented, as well as a couple resources that give background and primary quotes. My thinking behind this lesson was to give students just a small portion of material to read and 'translate' followed by a more active engagement, such as a skit, talk show, or other student-created display of their ideas.*

Lesson Option 1:

Step 1: Split the class into four or five groups. Assign each group a 'perspective' or historical figure to work with. I plan to split them up based on the following perspectives:

- 1) George Washington as a political figure and slave owner
- 2) Abigail Adams as a non-slave owner speaking and acting for racial equality
- 3) Southern slave owners who fear a slave rebellion and rely on slaves for productivity (Some might argue that George Washington could fit into this category as well)
- 4) Voices of actual slaves themselves.

Step 2: Give each group a small piece of writing from that figure or group of people, such as from the attached examples (see \*\* 'players in slavery dilemma' below). Have them work with the quote(s) and figure out the following things:

What is the position on slavery by this group or person?

Why, given who they are, does this position make sense?

What do they have to gain or lose from slavery? Getting rid of slavery?

(Depending on how much background you provide on each character, you may have to move around to each table group answering questions about background)

Step 3: Now, assign each student in the group a number 1-5 (or however many students there are) and have all the ones get together, twos, etc. There should be new groups with one person from the class representing each of the perspectives.

The task of these new groups is to show in a dramatic way, some of the dilemmas of slavery. This could be done as a skit, as an episode of Maury Povich, as a newscast with interviews, etc.

Step 4: Present skits.

### Lesson Option #2:

Step 1: Give each group all perspectives.

Step 2: Have them discuss and record answers to the three prompts (What is their position? Why, given who they are, does this position make sense? What do they have to gain or lose?) for each player.

Step 3: Have them chose roles within their groups and design a creative and dramatic presentation that illustrates the controversy of slavery.

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\*\*Players in "Slavery dilemma" lesson plan:

**George Washington-** General of the Continental Army, Plantation and slave owner, First president of the U.S.

GW quotes: *"I can only say, that there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it (slavery)"* (p 121 GW Reconsidered)

*"to set them afloat at once would, I really believe, be productive of much inconvenience and mischief; but by degrees it certainly might and assuredly ought to be effected"* (1786, letter to Lafayette, p 122 GW Reconsidered)

**John Lafayette:** Lafayette was a close friend of George Washington. He was a Frenchman and a social elite who had fought with Washington. According to historian Dorothy Twohig:

"Lafayette, an outspoken opponent of the system (of slavery), wrote Washington from France in 1783 suggesting they cooperate in an experimental settlement for freed slaves...Lafayette proposed that he and Washington *'Unite in Purchasing a*

*Small Estate Where We May try the Experiment to free the Negroes, and Use them only as tenants...'* In February 1786 Lafayette informed Washington that he had bought a plantation in Cayenne for a "Hundred and twenty five thousand French livres (money)...and am going to free my Negroes in order to Make that Experiment which you know is my Hobby Horse." (page 122 of *George Washington Reconsidered*)

**Abigail Adams** – Boston resident, highly educated, married to John Adams, ran her farm without owning slaves.

*"I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be Equally Strong in... those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs."*

And 2/13/1791: Along with educating her own children, she taught other children, including the incident she recorded in a letter to her husband, John Adams, in 1791, when she described trying to help a young black servant boy who asked for her help to get an education. She enrolled him in a local evening school, but several people objected to his admission to the school. Abigail responded he was

*"a Freeman as much as any of the young Men and merely because his Face is Black, is he to be denied instruction? How is he to be qualified to procure a livelihood? . . . I have not thought it any disgrace to my self to take him into my parlor and teach him both to read and write." (Letter to John, Feb 2, 1791)*

**Southern slave owners** who relied on slave labor to run their plantations. Afraid of slave rebellion:

*"reports (are) daily circulated that the Negroes of this plantation had refused to work, that in another they had obtained arms and were gone into the woods, that others had actually murdered their masters and their families, etc"* (George Milligen, a prominent loyalist in South Carolina)

### **Voices of Slaves:**

May 25, 1774: *"...we have in common with all other men a natural right to our freedoms without Being depriv'd of them by our fellow men... But we were unjustly dragged by the cruel hand of power from our dearest friends and some of us stolen from the bosoms of our tender parents...and brought hither to be made slaves for life in a Christian land... Our children are also taken from us by force and sent many miles from us where we seldom or ever see them again...We therefore beg...that we may obtain our Natural right (and) our freedoms..."*