

National Endowment for the Humanities
Summer Institute at Boston University
George Washington and His Legacy: Myths, Symbols and Reality

Snapshots of George Washington: Lesson Plan by Jill Foulis
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Overview: In many survey courses, the amount of time which teachers are able to spend on George Washington is limited. The purpose of this lesson is to give students the opportunity to explore major events dealing with the career of George Washington through art and using appropriate primary and secondary source readings in a limited amount of time. While I recognize the variety of important topics that surround Washington (slavery, Christianity, farmer) the focus of this lesson is on events. Hopefully through the art and readings, students will get a better understanding of Washington as a leader and the importance of his legacy on the United States.

The flexibility exists for a teacher to use this lesson as an abbreviated timeline of several major events in Washington's life over 1-2 days depending on scheduling or use the individual activities as you touch upon the different events in your classes. Target audience is that of middle and high school students.

Activity:

I. George Washington, The Man

Student discussion: Who was George Washington? What did he look like? Where do we see representations of him?

After initial discussion, place "Porthole Portrait" of George Washington by Rembrandt Peale on overhead or television screen. Portrait known as **Patriae Pater** is available through the National Portrait Gallery website. www.npg.si.edu/exh/travpres/gws3.htm

Discuss with students what they see in this painting. What type of man does Washington look like? What type of leader do you think he is? This painting was completed after Washington's death and Peale was attempting, after many trials, to portray what he looked like as well as what he had accomplished. Peale also hoped this would become the image Americans would think of when they thought of Washington. Of course this isn't the most famous painting of Washington, but do you think Peale was successful in his portrayal of what we think of Washington's physical likeness and his accomplishments?

Read Thomas Jefferson's letter to Walter Jones 2 January 1814. Jefferson describes Washington's physical appearance and temperament. Create a chart of the positive and negative aspects of George Washington according to Jefferson. (An example would be Washington's temper.) Note: Jefferson and Washington did not always see eye to eye on matters even though Jefferson served in Washington's administration. Jefferson was very critical of Washington especially during his second term.

II. Colonel Washington

Place the 1772 painting of Colonel George Washington by Charles Wilson Peale on the overhead. Available in several locations on the web but you can try the following site- <http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/revolution/wash-pix/w-port1.jpg>

Ask students: what impressions do you have of Washington as a young colonel? How do you think he feels about his service in the military? What symbolic references are portrayed here? Note the military orders in his pocket. (Napoleon is often painted with his hand in his jacket, could he have been emulating Washington?)

Read the secondary source from Morison in which Washington gets his first taste of battle in a campaign which ultimately began the French and Indian War thanks to Washington himself. (in our packet of readings pages 50-51- paragraphs beginning with "At twenty-one..." and "A phrase of young...".

What impressions do you have of George Washington after reading this passage?

Are you surprised he was exhilarated by the bullets and war in general?

Does Washington show his age in these remarks?

Do you think his attitude will change as he embarks on the Revolutionary War?

*You could take this opportunity to relate this activity to current events and how soldiers and civilians today view war.

III. Revolutionary War General

Display the portrait of Washington at Princeton by Charles Wilson Peale.

http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/art/common/image/Painting_31_00002.htm

How is George Washington portrayed? What type of leader might he be from this painting? How do you think the war is going so far for the Americans by this picture?

Students may response positively because of Washington's relaxed appearance.

Read Washington's letter to President of Congress John Hancock on September 24, 1776.

In direct contrast to the relaxed Washington is a letter of concern about the state of the war, the militia, and the dire need for supplies. Contrast the reading with response given to the Peale painting. Point out how Washington feels about the militia. Does that surprise the students that the Commander-in-Chief feels so poorly about the men in whom he must defend the nation? How should John Hancock respond to this letter from Washington? How would you feel if you were a foot soldier and you intercepted this letter?

You could compare this painting of Washington with the one of George III available at

<http://www.artrenewal.org/asp/database/image.asp?id=26027>

Do you see any similarities in these two painting? Pose is similar as is the military garb.

IV. Resignation of George Washington as Commander-in-Chief

Begin with a discussion on the topic of power. Is it difficult to give up power once you have it? By giving up power, does it show the mark of a great person? What would you do in a similar situation?

Read Washington's Address to Congress on Resigning His Commission as General of the Army. If time permits in your lesson, you could have students read excerpts from his Farewell Address to the Armies of the United States.

What message does Washington send to the citizens of the United States as well as the world by giving up power and the command of the army?
Is Washington acting as a role model for future generations? Why or why not?
Is it important for Washington to give up power now that the war is over?

Use John Trumbell's painting of Washington's Resignation that hangs in the Rotunda of the Capitol Building. http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/ROTUNDA/george_1.html

Who are the people to the left of Washington? (Congress)
Who is observing the resignation from the balcony? (Martha)
Why would it be important to have this painting in the Capitol Building?
What message does this painting send to future generations about our government?

Bonus* Trumbell painted 3 other paintings for the Capitol Building. Find out what they are for extra credit.

V. The Presidency

Use the famous Lansdowne Painting by Gilbert Stuart in 1796. There is an excellent interactive web program at <http://www.georgewashington.si.edu/portrait/>
It has an audio background program about the painting, the artist Stuart, and the history of the painting. In addition, students can explore different symbolic aspects of the painting. This activity is worth the time if available.

To correspond with the Lansdowne Painting, students read Washington's First Inaugural Address. After reading the Address, students should rewrite the overall messages he is sending to Congress and the people of the United States in contemporary language. This could be done in small groups or on an individual basis. In addition, choose any part of the message and draw a picture depicting it. Use creative license to make the representation your own. (Possible homework assignment)

VI. Farewell to Public Life

Use “General Washington’s Resignation” by Alexander Lawson available at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/gw/gwmoral.html>

Examine with your students all of the symbolism in the painting including the woman who represents Liberty, the rural setting of what could be Mount Vernon in the background, the towers representing power, Washington’s undecorated military wardrobe, and the eagle in the foreground.

Use excerpts from Washington’s Farewell Address along with appropriate reading comprehension questions. Many textbooks offer this address as a supplemental option.

Another option would be to read the last few pages of Joseph Ellis’ essay on the Farewell beginning with the first full paragraph on page 155 in his book *Founding Brothers*. (or the last sentence on page 239 of Higginbotham’s *George Washington Reconsidered*. This is a nice selection encapsulating what the Address’s message was as well as what the departure of Washington meant to the nation.

As a connection to current events, what might George Washington view the events of the world today. Would he recommend our nation be as involved as we are in world affairs or would he recommend restraint? Speculating may be enjoyable for students and stimulate conversation about Washington as well as current events.

VII. “He Died as He Lived”

Display the engraving of Washington’s Death available on the pbs.org website. Couple the image with the first chapter of Peter Henriques’ book *The Death of George Washington: He Died As He Lived*. This gives a vivid description of the day Washington died. In addition, there is a primary source account of Washington’s death by his grandson, George Washington Custis available at <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/washington.htm>

Compare and contrast the two accounts.

Write a eulogy for George Washington. Be sure to include passages on his accomplishments, his character, and his legacy.

As a wrap up activity, you could look at various ways Washington was eulogized by the people of the United States. (They were in mourning for an entire year!)

*Find images of Washington used in the 20th century. How was his image used and for what product or organization? What message does it send to the public? Thinking about the time in which the image was used, why would George Washington have been chosen? An example would be Washington appears on a Sears catalog from the 1920s-1930s painting by Norman Rockwell. His image is used in an era of change but makes a connection to the past.