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NEH Institute: George Washington
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Curriculum Unit: George Washington & Slavery

Grade Level/Subject: High school U.S. History or Government

Essential Questions:

- Does a slave owner deserve to be considered the “father of our country”?
- Can heroes have flaws?
- Why do we need heroes?
- How does George Washington’s writing and action on the issue of slavery compare to his contemporaries?
- Should the United States address this stain on our nation’s past? How?

Objectives:

- To understand the extent to which slavery was embedded in eighteenth century America.
- To appreciate the complexity of George Washington’s evolving attitudes toward slavery.
- To understand the concept of “presentism” as it relates to contemporary analysis of historical figures.
- To become familiar with contemporary discussions about slavery, reparations, and historical memory.
- To familiarize students with primary source-based web sites relating to George Washington.
- To formulate an argument based on documentary evidence to be presented in a formal class debate.

Day #1: George Washington: Hero or Slave owner? (assumes 45-50 minute class period)

-Project image of Washington as a statesman (e.g., The Lansdowne Portrait¹) and/or a general on a LCD projector while students write on the following questions (5 minutes):

- What comes to mind when you think of George Washington? What have you learned previously?
- Was he a hero? Why or why not?
- Do we need heroes? Why or why not? Who are our heroes today?

-Discuss student responses. Generate a list of key labels/accomplishments associated with Washington. Try to generalize about what qualities make someone a “hero.” Note if “slave owner” comes up in this discussion.

-Wrap up discussion by projecting an image of Washington with his slaves.²

¹ See <http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/maps/> for portraits/images of Washington.

² One of these images is available on the Mt. Vernon website:

http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/meet_george/index.cfm/ss/101/cfid/2282113/cftoken/41216813; other images are available in the MVL’s publication “The George Washington Biography Lesson” distributed by Jim Rees (see pages 35-36 for “The Life of George Washington: The Farmer” and 39-40 for “The Washington Family”).

-As a class, read the first few pages of Ron Briley's "More than Just a Slave Holder: George Washington, Adolescents, and American Culture in the 1990s" (reprinted in NEH packet; see pages 215-217). This article highlights the controversy in New Orleans that developed after changing the name of school, a policy adopted by the school board to show its opposition to the naming of schools after "former slave owners." Discuss article with students:

- Do they agree with this policy? Why or why not?
- As historians, how should we assess Washington's overall legacy/accomplishments? What information should we seek out?

-For homework, read the following essays:

- Grizzard, Frank E. *George! A Guide to All Things Washington*. (See entry under "Slavery," pages 282-286)
- Twowig, Dorothy. "The Controversy over Slavery" (reprinted in Higginbotham's *George Washington Reconsidered*, pages 314-338)

Day #2: George Washington and Slavery

-Discuss previous night's reading in small groups.

Grizzard essay:

- How does Grizzard describe the condition of slaves living at Mt. Vernon?
- In what ways does Washington's attitude toward slavery change over time? How do you account for this change?
- How does Washington provide for the well-being of his slaves upon his death?

Twowig essay:

- Why do you suppose the author begins her essay with this letter to George Washington?
- What policies did Washington formulate regarding blacks in the military as commander of the Continental Army?
- Evaluate the significance of the following sentence: "But Washington was a political realist." (page 124)
- How does the Constitution address the issue of slavery?
- How did Washington react to the slave rebellion in Haiti in the 1790s?
- What do you think is Twowig's ultimate assessment of Washington? Is it a heroic assessment?

-Debrief the small group discussions with the entire class, paying particular attention to the following questions:

- Does a slave owner deserve to be considered the "father of our country"?
- Can heroes have flaws?

-For homework, read the following online sources:

1. www.pbs.org/georgewashington/

- Invoice, November 26, 1799 (go to “The Washington Collection,” then “Post-Presidential Years”); look for references to slavery.
- Last Will and Testament (go to “The Washington Collection”, then “Other Documents”); skim this document and carefully read all references to his slaves.

2. Letter from George Washington to Marquis de Lafayette (May 10, 1786): See American Memory Project for transcription:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/collections/gw/file.html>

Relevant passage of letter:

The benevolence of your heart my Dr. Marqs. is so conspicuous upon all occasions, that I never wonder at any fresh proofs of it; but your late purchase of an estate in the colony of Cayenne, with a view of emancipating the slaves on it, is a generous and noble proof of your humanity. Would to God a like spirit would diffuse itself generally into the minds of the people of this country; but I despair of seeing it. Some petitions were presented to the Assembly, at its last Session, for the abolition of slavery, but they could scarcely obtain a reading. 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; and that too by Legislative authority.

3. For description of slave lists, see:

<http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents/will/slavelist.html>

4. Visit the Mt. Vernon website and assess its coverage/discussion of slavery:
www.mountvernon.org

Day #3: Assessing the documentary evidence

-Large or small group discussion on previous night’s documents:

- What was most interesting/surprising to you about these documents?
- Does his last will and testament make you more or less sympathetic toward Washington?
- How does the issue of slavery play out in the historical memory of Washington? How does Mt. Vernon treat this sensitive issue on its website?
- What questions would you pose to Washington if you had the chance? What does the documentary evidence leave out?

-For homework, read Douglas Wilson’s “Thomas Jefferson and the Meanings of Liberty” (reprinted in Stephen Oates, *Portrait of America*, Vol. 1)

Day #4: George Washington and His Contemporaries on Slavery

-Discuss Wilson's essay:

- What is "presentism"? Why does Wilson suggest that we "invert" the question when we assess Jefferson? How do you think the New Orleans school board would respond to this concept?
- How does he describe Jefferson's attitude toward slavery? Is he an apologist for Jefferson?
- Has Jefferson's prolific writing on slavery (in contrast to Washington) made him more vulnerable to scrutiny today?

-As a class, read excerpts from Gordon Wood's *The Americanization of Ben Franklin* re: slavery on pages 226-229; look for references to a March 23, 1790 petition in which he satirizes a defense of slavery with reference to the Barbary pirates' enslavement of white Christians.

Discuss:

- How does Franklin's attitudes and actions compare to Washington and Jefferson? Why is this comparison an important exercise?
- Was Franklin's antislavery activity an anomaly for this era?
- Does the comparison to Franklin and Jefferson help us better answer the question of whether or not a slave owner should be considered the father of this country?

-For homework, read Gordon Wood's "The Greatness of George Washington" (reprinted in Higginbotham's *George Washington Reconsidered*, pages 309-324)

Day #5: George Washington: Symbol, Hero, Textbook Treatments

-As a class, discuss Wood's assessment of Washington:

- What is the essence of his "greatness"?
- How does Wood treat the issue of slavery?
- Does this essay present Washington as a hero?

-Divide the class into small groups to evaluate textbook treatments of Washington (a "jigsaw" activity might work nicely here). The following textbooks should provide a variety of perspectives³:

Norton, et al. *A People, A Nation*
Bailey, *American Pageant*
Goldfield, et al. *The American Journey*
Roark, et al. *The American Promise*

Students should consider the following in their assessments of the textbook descriptions of Washington:

- Facts/accomplishments mentioned

³ Columbia University has a repository of old textbooks in its Education Library. Comparing older versions of the same textbook (Bailey, for example) might provide an interesting discussion as to how the treatment of Washington has changed over time.

- Tone/attitude: Is Washington presented as a hero?
- Coverage of slavery

-Debrief this exercise with the entire class:

- How varied were the textbook accounts?
- What did they learn from this exercise?
- Do textbooks have a point of view?
- How should Washington be taught to elementary students? To high schoolers?
- How do we discuss yesterday's wrongs? Is talking about them enough?

-For homework, read the following articles:

- *New York Times* Editorial, "An Update on Corporate Slavery" (January 31, 2005)
- Belluck, Pam. "Brown University to Examine Debt to Slave Trade." *New York Times*. March 13, 2004.
- Goldstein, Dana. "As buzz fades, Slavery and Justice members contemplate mission." *Brown Daily Herald*. April 29, 2004. (see Appendix)
- Avery, Camden. "Weekend conference examines slavery reparations." *Brown Daily Herald*. March 21, 2005. (see Appendix)
- Barboza, Maurice A. and Gary B. Nash. "We Need to Learn More About Our Colorful Past." *New York Times*. July 31, 2004.

Day #6: Making Amends for the Past: Contemporary Discussions on Slavery and Reparations

-Discuss previous night's readings with the class:

- How is the city of Chicago attempting to deal with the issue of slavery?
- How would you summarize the discussion occurring at Brown University regarding its connection to the slave trade/slavery?
- What is the point of Barboza and Nash's editorial?
- In what ways should we attempt to deal with this stain on our nation's history? (reparations, apology, reconciliation committee, national slavery museum)

-Prepare students for upcoming debate. Divide students into Affirmative and Negative teams and assign teams one of the following possible topics:

- The United States government should pay reparations to descendents of former slaves.
- George Washington _____ (school, park, street, etc.—fill in whatever may appropriate to your locale) should be renamed so as to not make a hero out of a slave owner.
- Textbooks written for elementary students should not mention Washington's status as a slave owner.

- Considering his contemporaries, Washington held enlightened views regarding slavery.
- Washington deserves to be praised despite the fact that he owned slaves.

Students should rely on the documents and essays discussed in class to support their positions. The teams should divide up their arguments and assign each member an argument/role to prepare. Other students in the class and the teacher will serve as judges of the debate.

-For homework, students should work on their assigned arguments in preparation for the debate.

Days #7-8: Prepare and execute debates.

Project Assessment:

- Participation in class discussions.
- Evidence of completing the reading assignments carefully (annotations, participation, etc.)
- Debate grade (individual and team grade)
- Final essay (2 pages): To what extent should Washington's status as a slave owner affect our overall assessment of him? (Students will be graded on the clarity of their argument, lucidity of their writing, reference to documents and essays read throughout this unit, and appropriate documentation of these sources.)

For Additional Reading

Mihm, Stephen. "Liberty-Bell Plan Shows Freedom and Slavery." *New York Times*. April 23, 2003.

Smith, Dinitia. "Slave Site for a Symbol of Freedom." *New York Times*. April 20, 2002.