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Teaching George Washington with Tall Tales, Trinkets and Truth An introductory lesson to Revolutionary Era primary source documents

Introduction and Justification

The teaching of American history has become (and continues to be) nearly as politicized a pedagogical area as teaching the origins of the universe. Educators find themselves stretched on the rack between so called revisionists who want to reveal American history and historical characters "warts and all" and those groups who argue that this approach is too candid and sophisticated (if not outright demoralizing) for any but college-level students. Pundits rage on radio talk-shows about whether teachers should inform students only of the glories and heroism of their cultural story (and risk becoming Fox News jingoists) or whether they should pick at the ugly scabs of the festering past (and risk immobilizing young student minds in a quagmire of cynicism). No doubt some well-intentioned professionals have tried to do both, only to discover that such a "politically comprehensive" curriculum is most likely to leave students confused, ambivalent or worst of all, detached from their own heritage.

One approach is to defer to the origins of Classical history and acknowledge both the human ideals of a culture by examining its *mythology* as well as studying the historical events of a nation's journey to the present. So, just as Odysseus epitomized the cultural ideals of the Classical hero, the study of the Odyssey also has a place in the historical events of ancient Greece. Teachers across the humanities curriculum can value the Odyssey partly for the insight that the mythology gives into the soul of the culture, as well as its use as a starting point for the study of less ephemeral details of the ancient Mediterranean. In other words, when the cultural mythology of a historical individual or event clashes with the facts of the historical research or record, there is no reason to choose one version over the other.

American history demonstrates that the story of the Powhatan woman known to the Jamestown colonists as Pocahontas is not the pretty story portrayed in the Disney film and by many other children's book writers. The details of the story which include treachery, kidnapping, failed ransoms, disease and early death clash violently with the subtext of the legend of Pocahontas which has come to be more about cross-cultural understanding and symbiosis. An approach to teaching the historical episode which includes both the factual events and the legend surrounding them is more legitimately enlightening than teaching either one alone. This is not revisionist history. This isn't an attempt to deny historical fact in favor of legend. This is approaching the study of history by also embracing the cultural *ideals* of the people who lived it, or who developed from it.

By acknowledging the cultural mythology of an event or individual, an educator forestalls the appearance of teaching history as the "bath of blood" that William James called it, or encouraging students to conclude as Voltaire did that "All centuries are alike in the wickedness of men." By acknowledging the mythology of an episode in history *as well as the historical record of an event*, the teacher allows his students to understand that the creation of the mythology surrounding historical figures or events is, in itself, part of history. A culture expresses what it aspires to in the stories it creates about itself.

A cultural icon such as George Washington is an example of the type of historical figure who has received the laurels of posterity as well as the blows of more recent studies which question less favorable aspects of his historical life and actions. Introducing a study of Revolutionary Era American history using an exploration and discussion of Washington's mythological aura as well as verifiable history is revelatory to high school students on a number of levels because it allows them to see the figure from several perspectives (political and otherwise) and as a product of the very history he was indispensable in creating. On an even more practical level it allows students to see for themselves how primary and

secondary source documents can be imbued with subjective information and how to draw their own conclusions about the meaning and worth of such information.

Lesson Objectives and Time Requirements

Critical Questions: **What do we know about George Washington?**
How do we come to know these things?
How trustworthy is the information we have?
How important is the information we have and what makes it important?

Objectives

Students will examine and comment on historical information including some primary source documents relating to George Washington

Students will discuss the differentiate between verifiable information obtainable from the documents and subjective or implied information within the documents

Students will extrapolate through discussion the importance of the Washington information in terms of historical and cultural worth

Students will record their experiences in writing explaining the process and their conclusions regarding the documents they have been given to examine.

Time Requirements

The lesson is designed for modified block scheduling to be presented in a series of three 90 minute classes with time for at-home writing and reflection.

Background

For the purpose of this introductory lesson to the use of Revolutionary Era primary source documents it is helpful to have introduced students to the idea that there are differences between historical events and the cultural mythology that often surrounds them. One possibility would be an exploration of what is known about the Plymouth harvest festival from Bradford's [Of Plymouth Plantation](#) and the Edward Winslow letter, along with popular paintings of the Thanksgiving theme and memories from students themselves about their own elementary school pageants.

Procedure

Day One: Discovery

Tell students that they are going to examine a box of “artifacts” that supply information about an important historical figure from American history. Tell them they will know who the figure is, but to try to approach their observations like detectives without bringing into their exploration or conclusions any prior knowledge of the subject in their descriptions and conclusions (though they can use other personal knowledge about painters, locations, other historical characters etc.).

Students are divided into groups of no more than 4 and each group is presented with a “History in a Box” container holding a number of items. Suggested contents of the box might include:

- A one dollar bill
- A small George Washington trinket from a party supply store
- Color photographs of paintings of Washington (attached)
- Color photographs of statues of Washington (attached)
- A copy of 3 separate documents written by George Washington
 - Letter to Burwell Bassett on engagement of their children
 - Letter concerning the sale of escaped slave
 - Letter concerning religious freedom
- A copy of 4 separate documents written about George Washington by contemporaries
 - The Abigail Adams description of Washington
 - Thomas Jefferson description of Washington: Jan 2, 1814
 - Anecdotes of George Washington Parke Custis: 1863
 - Parson Weems “Cherry Tree” anecdote
- A copy of a children’s book about George Washington
 - Pheobe the Spy
 - George vs. George
 - George Washington’s Teeth

Groups are allowed to examine all of their items at length, dividing them as they wish among themselves.

Each student must write responses to prompts on the “Detecting George Washington: Individual Observations” worksheet.

Day Two: Analysis

Students come together and compare their responses to the individual worksheet prompts. They also begin to discuss what they have surmised about the history and subtext of each of the items.

Groups then fill out the second “Detecting George Washington” worksheet.

Each group attaches all of the individual worksheets to the group worksheet to grading.

It may be that some classes will finish this portion quickly enough that large group discussion could begin the second day. The teacher should be prepared for this possibility, though as long as small group discussion is remaining **focused** on the objects, documents and George Washington, students should be allowed ample time to process what they have found.

Day Three: Synthesis and Debrief

Class is reassembled. On the blackboard: **What did you learn from the documents and images about George Washington?** Then headings for three columns: “**Probably verifiable**”, “**Probably fictional**”, and “**Significance**”.

The teacher then leads the class in filling in the spaces beneath each heading while answering the major question. There is discussion about why items are put into the verifiable or fictional categories. There is further discussion of what items seem to indicate positive or negative aspects of Washington’s character. Discuss how these attributes are used as cultural symbols and how they play a part in the Washington Legend and finally, what the legend indicates about the culture.

Follow up: Written Analysis

Students can be assigned a brief reaction and recall paper.

Prompt: **Write a one-page narrative account of the process you followed in the last three-day introduction to George Washington. Also describe what you remember most clearly from the lesson and explain any personal insights you gained from the activity. Finally, briefly state what purpose you think George Washington serves as a national icon.**



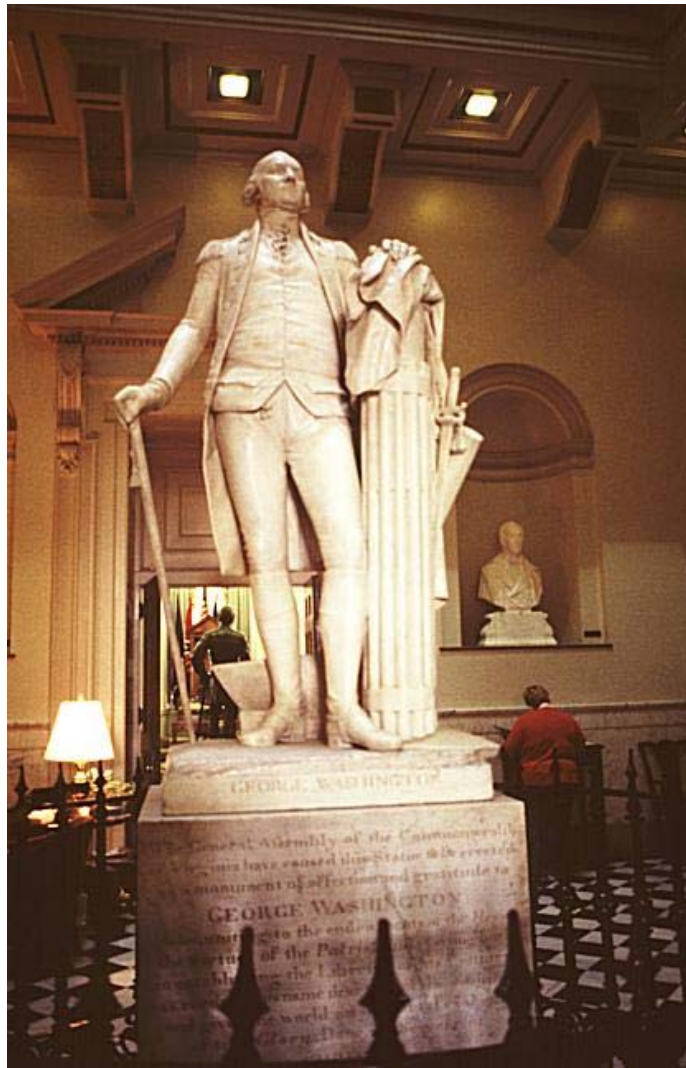




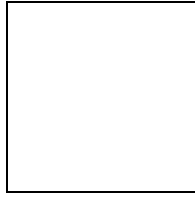


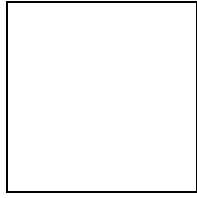


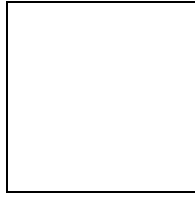


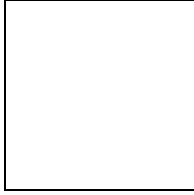










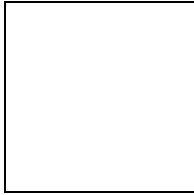


Detecting George Washington

Individual observation and questions

Carefully examine each of the items you have been given by your group and then on a separate sheet of paper write responses to each of the following questions.

1. Describe the objects you have been given pretending you know nothing about Washington or U.S. history. If you are describing a document, summarize it thoroughly making sure you note the date it was written, to whom it was written and the document's purpose. If you are describing an object, a photograph or a painting, describe it in as much detail as you can as though you were trying to describe what you are looking at to someone over the phone. Avoid using subjective descriptions (i.e. "hard to understand" if describing writing style or "stupid hairdo" when describing a painting or sculpture) but give examples and clear words and phrases on which your unstated personal opinion is based.
2. Paintings and sculpture usually include some symbolic objects in them to express more information about their subjects. Documents will make allusions to other documents or quote other people which serves to carry abstract meaning as well. Keeping these things in mind, what assumptions can you make about this man "Washington" based on the objects you are examining (i.e. is he well-educated or not? Rich, middle-class, poor)? Explain how you come to those assumptions.
3. What facts can you extract about the man? What makes you classify these ideas as facts rather than assumptions?
4. What concepts or attitudes are repeated in several items or in different ways in the same item?
5. Which concepts or attitudes seem to appear only once?
6. How would you describe this man based solely on the information you have gleaned from your observations?



Detecting George Washington

Group observations and conclusions

With all of the members of your group back together, allow each member to describe what he or she was given to examine. Other group members may ask questions at this time and look for clarification in group members' descriptions.

On a separate sheet of paper, write down your group's conclusions about the following questions.

1. Did your group encounter contradictions in your summaries or discoveries/observations/inferences about Washington? Describe the contradictions. What do the contradictions lead you to think about your subject?
2. What ideas, attitudes and/or facts are repeated in more than one place?
3. Based on the combined information, what observations or conclusions do you feel confident as being factual? Why? What things seem doubtful or unsubstantiated? Why?
4. Make a list of at **least five** things you and your group would like to know more about. Explain why you think your current information is incomplete or inaccurate. If you were going to test your conclusions, where would you go for further research? ("The internet" is NOT an acceptable answer!) What, specifically would you look for? Where would you begin? How would you plan your research in order to get to specific information that your group could use?
5. What kind of documentation would be the most reliable for your further research? Why?

The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799. John C. Fitzpatrick, Editor.

New York, November 27, 1783.

Gentlemen: The illustrious and happy event on which you are pleased to congratulate and wellcome me to this City, demands all our gratitude; while the favorable sentiments you have thought proper to express of my conduct, intitles you to my warmest acknowledgements.⁸³

[Note 83: The address of the ministers *et al.*, dated New York, Nov. 27, 1783, is signed "Johann Daniel Gros V. D. Minister."]

Disposed, at every suitable opportunity to acknowledge publicly our infinite obligations to the Supreme Ruler of the Universe for rescuing our Country from the brink of destruction; I cannot fail at this time to ascribe all the honor of our late successes to the same glorious Being. And if my humble exertions have been made in any degree subservient to the execution of the divine purposes, a contemplation of the benediction of Heaven on our righteous Cause, the approbation of my virtuous Countrymen, and the testimony of my own Conscience, will be a sufficient reward and augment my felicity beyond anything which the world can bestow.

The establishment of Civil and Religious Liberty was the Motive which induced me to the Field; the object is attained, and it now remains to be my earnest wish and prayer, that the Citizens of the United States would make a wise and virtuous use of the blessings, placed before them; and that the reformed german Congregation in New York; may not only be conspicuous for their religious character, but as exemplary, in support of our inestimable acquisitions, as their reverend Minister has been in the attainment of them.⁸⁴

[Note 84: The draft is in the writing of David Humphreys.]

The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799. John C. Fitzpatrick, Editor.

[Note 75: Of the schooner *Swift*, in the West Indies trade.]

Mount Vernon, July 2, 1766.

Sir: With this Letter comes a Negro (Tom) which I beg the favour of you to sell, in any of the Islands you may go to, for whatever he will fetch, and bring me in return from him

- One Hhd of best Molasses
- One Ditto of best Rum
- One Barrl of Lymes, if good and Cheap
- One Pot of Tamarinds, contg. about 10 lbs.
- Two small Do of mixed Sweetmeats, abt. 5 lb. each.
- And the residue, much or little, in good old Spirits.

That this Fellow is both a Rogue and a Runaway (tho' he was by no means remarkable for the former, and never practised the latter till of late) I shall not pretend to deny. But that he is exceeding healthy, strong, and good at the Hoe, the whole neighbourhood can testifie and particularly Mr. Johnson and his Son, who have both had him under them as foreman of the gang; which gives me reason to hope he may, with your good management, sell well, if kept clean and trim'd up a little when offerd for Sale.

I shall very chearfully allow you the customary Commissions on this affair, and must beg the favour of you (lest he shoud attempt his escape) to keep him handcuffd till you get to Sea, or in the Bay, after which I doubt not but you may make him very useful to you.

I wish you a pleasant and prosperous Passage, and a safe and speedy return,⁷⁶ being Sir, etc.

[Note 76: It was a common practice to transport troublesome blacks. In the Boston *Evening Post* of Aug, 3, 1761, occurs the following advertisement: "To be Sold, a Parcel of Likely Negroes, imported from Africa, cheap for Cash, or short credit...Also if any Persons have any Negro Men, strong and hearty, tho' not of the best moral character, which are proper subjects for Transportation, may have an Exchange for small Negroes."-- *Ford*.]

The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799. John C. Fitzpatrick, Editor.

Mount Vernon, May 23, 1785.

Dear Sir: It would have given me much pleasure to have seen you at Richmond; and it was part of my original plan to have spent a few days with you at Eltham, whilst I was in the lower parts of the country; but an intervention of circumstances not only put it out of my power to do the latter, but would have stopped my journey to Richmond altogether, had not the meeting (the time and the place) been of my own appointing. I left company at home when I went away, who proposed to wait my return, among whom a Mr. Pine, an artist of eminence, came all the way from Philadelphia for some materials for an historical painting which he is about, and for which he was obliged to stay 'till I got back, which I did after an absence of eight days only.

My Nephew G. Aug: Washington is just returned from his peregrination; apparently much amended in his health, but not *quite* free from the disorder in his breast. I have understood that his addresses to your Daughter were made with your consent; and I now learn that he is desirous, and she is willing to fulfill the engagement they have entered into; and that they are applying to you for permission therefor.

It has ever been a maxim with me thro' life, neither to promote, nor to prevent a matrimonial connection, unless there should be something indispensably requiring interference in the latter: I have always considered marriage as the most interesting event of one's life, the foundation of happiness or misery; to be instrumental therefore in bringing two people together who are indifferent to each other, and may soon become objects of hatred; or to prevent a union which is prompted by mutual esteem and affection, is what I never could reconcile to my feelings; and therefore, neither directly nor indirectly have I ever said a syllable to Fanny or George upon the subject of their intended connexion; but as their attachment to each other seems to have been early formed, warm and lasting, it bids fair to be happy: if therefore you have no objection, I think the sooner it is consummated the better.

I have just now informed them (the former thro' Mrs. Washington) that it is my wish they should live here.

It is unnecessary I hope to say how happy we should be to see you, her brothers, and any of her friends here upon this occasion (who can make it convenient and are disposed to come); all here join in best wishes for you, and with very sincere esteem etc.⁹¹

[Note 91: Ford's text varies in numerous points from this "Letter Book" copy in the *Washington Papers*. He does [not state his source.](#)]

Excerpt from a letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams July 16, 1775

I was struck with General Washington. You had prepared me to entertain a favorable opinion of him, but I thought the one half was not told me. Dignity with ease, and complacency, the Gentleman and Soldier look agreeably blended in him. Modesty marks every line and feature of his face. Those lines of Dryden instantly occurred to me

"Mark his Majestick fabrick! He's a temple
Sacred by birth, and built by hands divine
His Souls the Deity that lodges there.
Nor is the pile unworthy of the God."

General Lee looks like a careless hardy Veteran and from his appearance brought to my mind his namesake Charles the 12, king of Sweden. The Elegance of his pen far exceeds that of his person. I was much pleased with your Friend Collins. I persuaded them to stay coffee with me, and he was as unreserved and social as if we had been old acquaintances, and said he was very loth to leave the house. I would have detained them till morning, but they were very desirous of reaching Cambridge.