

WASHINGTON'S COMPLEX VIEWS ON SLAVERY

A pair of timelines provide context for an informal dialogue about George Washington and slavery to support teacher-directed civic discussion and/or cumulative activity.

LEVEL:

High School (Grades 9 – 12)

TIMEFRAME:

Approximately one class session

STANDARDS:

- Early American History
 - Civics
- Reading, speaking, and listening

EAD THEME:

Contemporary Debates and Possibilities (Develop a critique)

QUESTIONS:

- How can we use Washington's historical actions to investigate future uncertainty and fallibility with regard to our own civic participation?
 - What specific methods did Washington use to adapt and/or pressure his society regarding enslaved individuals and the institution of slavery? What were the strengths and limitations of the method he chose? What are the strengths and limitations as we look toward the challenges in the future?
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PLAN:

Engage:

1. Begin the discussion by asking the students what they know about George Washington and enslavement. The caliber of these questions is up to teacher discretion.
2. Suggest that analyzing primary sources may help students better understand slavery in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Explore:

- Recognizing the limitations of time and the diversity of classroom contexts, **we defer to teacher discretion in directing student interaction with the timelines** (provided in PDF).
 - The materials provide opportunities for students to read the event summaries, to engage with the excerpts, and to dig into the primary sources in full.

- Similarly, rather than feel pressured to cover the timelines in their entirety, teachers are encouraged to curate at will a selection of events for students to examine, or to assign particular events to groups of students in ways that best fit their varied learning contexts.
1. The timelines are curated lists of dates, events, and writings of Washington relating to enslaved persons and the institution of slavery.
 - a. They are not exhaustive — in fact many entries considered relevant were excluded out of necessity — yet, they are substantial.
 - b. Here, our intention is to reflect the span and nuance of Washington’s actions and stated opinions to foster student understanding of the historical complexity of the issue, rather than to judge Washington through a presentism lens.

Explain/Evaluate:

- We see civic friendship and civil disagreement as fundamental to this learning experience. Our goal is to support students’ ability to engage in the difficult conversations that are necessary to support a diverse democratic society.
 - This includes having discussions that are grounded in evidence and reflect critical understanding of how our shared history and experiences contribute to contemporary society.
 - At the same time, we wanted to allow for flexibility to honor how these discussions may look different in different learning spaces.
- To these ends, we recommend that **teachers model and employ relevant protocols as appropriate** and establish or review student expectations for participating in academic discourse and civil discussion as needed.

Extend:

- Our goal is to empower students to use the lessons of Washington to employ civic engagement in their own lives and communities and to engage in appropriate, legal democratic processes. However, we defer to teacher discretion to determine the form of civic engagement that best fits their instructional contexts. Teachers may choose to count the discussion as the culminating activity, or may have students create a final product, including, but not limited to:
 - A written assignment that is narrative, reflective, persuasive, or argumentative;

- Creating posters, public service announcements, art installations, or multimedia presentations to raise awareness about civic issues and responsibility;
- Transposing the learnings from this learning experiences into learning activities to teach younger grades;
- Identifying and/or engaging with relevant local, state, or national stakeholders (community organizations, officials, law-makers, politicians, or traditional media outlets) through letter writing, email, or social media;
- Joining or starting a club or community based organization dedicated to their interests;
- Proposing a new process or creating a technical innovation to address the issue.

We see this learning experience as most broadly aligned to Educating for American Democracy (EAD) themes *A People with Contemporary Debates & Possibilities* and *We the People* and have designed our history and civics questions/discussion prompts accordingly. However, we recognize alignment to other EAD themes, such as *Civic Participation* and *Institutional & Social Transformation*, and encourage teachers to employ these and/or other thematic lenses that may be more aligned to the work occurring in their own contexts.

LANGUAGE USAGE

We acknowledge that words have associated cultural and connotative meanings, some of which may be sensitive or negative, especially for students; however, our intention is to provide students with the historical understanding of terms and their meanings as they were used in context. In this lesson, we use the term “African” to indicate persons originating from the continent who were enslaved and transported as part of the transatlantic slave trade. The terms “Negro” and “Black” are used interchangeably to describe the mix of peoples of African descent living in the colonies, including Africans and their American-born descendants. The term “Mulatto” is used to describe persons resulting from the union of mixed heritage, typically children of free white males borne by enslaved black women. The term “Indian” is used as a generic term to describe the peoples native to North America regardless of their tribal heritage or cultural affiliation. As appropriate, we suggest having a conversation with your students to become familiar with these meanings and to make distinctions between these terms and contemporary associations.

Slavery in Context Timeline and Resources — Summary

BUILD HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The following timeline is a curated list of dates and events that outline the institutional development of slavery in the Western Hemisphere beginning in the 1400s. Each entry contains a brief summary of an event, a quotation excerpted from supporting text where appropriate (located in the footnotes), and a citation or link to the original source (also located in the footnotes).

Analyze the timeline by investigating the selected entries. Suggested questions for your consideration include:

- What story does the timeline tell about the development of slavery as an institution in the Western Hemisphere?
- Which specific laws stand out to you, if any? Why?
- What connection(s) can you make to the relationship of these laws as part of America's "hard history" and present day conflicts/contemporary debates in society?
- How does the timeline/introduction inform your understanding of George Washington as a member of his society?

Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.

- 1441 Portuguese capture 12 Africans in Cabo Branco (present-day Mauritania) and bring them to Portugal as enslaved people.¹
- 1526 The first enslaved Africans are brought to North America by Spanish explorer Lucas Vazquez. They live in the San Miguel de Gualdape colony (present-day Georgia/South Carolina).²
- 1619 The first enslaved Africans in British North America arrive at Point Comfort near Jamestown, Virginia Royal colony.³
- 1640 John Punch, an African indentured servant, is sentenced to servitude for life as punishment for running away to Maryland from Virginia.⁴ His two European indentured runaway companions are sentenced to extended servitude four years.⁵
- 1641 Massachusetts Colony passes the “Massachusetts Body of Liberties” legislation that includes a provision (91) legalizing the enslavement of Negroes, Native Americans, and criminals.⁶ Other colonies, including Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Maryland, will pass similar laws.
- 1662 December. Virginia’s General Assembly enacts “ACT XII” legislating that newborn children inherit the legal status (enslaved or free) of the mother.⁷ Other colonies will pass similar laws.
- 1664 Maryland passes “An Act Concerning Negroes and Other Slaves” that: i) legalizes “Durante Vita” lifelong servitude for all Negroes and other slaves; ii) legalizes enslavement from birth of children born of a Negro or any other slave; iii) enslaves any free woman who would marry an Negro or other enslaved male for the duration of the life of the husband; and iv) enslaves any child born of the union of a free woman and Negro

¹ Michael Guasco, *Slaves and Englishmen: Human Bondage in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 4; and Sidney M. Geenfield, “Plantations, Sugar Cane, and Slavery” *Historical Reflections* 6 no.1 (Summer 1979), 85-119.

² Douglas T. Peck, “Lucas Vasquez de Ayllon’s Doomed Colony of San Miguel de Gualdape” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 85 no. 2 (Summer 2001), 183-198.

³ “African Americans at Jamestown,” *National Park Service* (February 26, 2015). Retrieved June 4, 2019. It is recorded that “20 and odd” Africans arrived from an English Warship. They were taken from a captured Portuguese slave ship and were moved to Jamestown.

⁴ John Donoghue, “Out of the Land of Bondage”: The English Revolution and the Atlantic Origins of Abolition” *The American Historical Review* (2010). Retrieved 23 July 2021.

⁵ Higginbotham, A. Leon Higginbotham, *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process: The Colonial Period* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press: 1975). Retrieved 23 July 2021.

⁶ “The Massachusetts Body of Liberties, 1641; Old South Leaflets,” <https://history.hanover.edu/texts/masslib.html>. Retrieved on 23 July 2021.

⁷ William Waller Hening, *The Statutes at large: Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature in the Year 1619* (New York: R & W & G. Bartow, 1823), 2:170. Retrieved 23 July 2021. <https://web.csulb.edu/~jlawler/Course%20DW/VirginiaSlaveLaws.htm>.

or other enslaved male for a duration of 30 years.⁸ New York, New Jersey, the Carolinas, and Virginia will pass similar laws.

- 1670 October. Virginia’s General Assembly enacts “ACT V” legislating that neither free Negroes nor Natives can purchase (white) Christian servants but can purchase enslaved Negroes or Natives.⁹
- 1676 Enslaved persons, indentured servants both Black and White, and poor colonists participate in Bacon’s Rebellion against the Governor, his wealthy allies, and friendly Native tribes in the Virginia colony. Following the rebellion, Virginia begins to enact legislation to eliminate indentured service and strengthen slave codes.
- 1680 June. Virginia General Assembly enacts “ACT X” forbidding slaves to carry weapons of any kind or to travel without a certificate of permission from their master punishable by 20 lashes from a whip. The law also permitted that slaves could be whipped with 30 lashes or killed for running away and/or resisting recapture.¹⁰
- 1691 April. Virginia’s General Assembly enacts “ACT XVI” empowering justices of the peace and county sheriffs to: i) raise any forces deemed necessary to apprehend runaway negroes, mulattoes, and other slaves, and ii) to lawfully kill or destroy by gun or any means whatsoever such runaways that resist, run, or refuse to surrender, with owners being compensated 4,000 pounds of tobacco provided by the Colony. The legislation also makes it illegal for slave owners to manumit (set free) enslaved people within its borders unless the owner pays for the enslaved to leave the Virginia colony within six months of being freed.
- 1732 May. Virginia General Assembly enacts “An Act directing the trial of Slaves” including a provision (XVII) that made it illegal to free any enslaved “negro, mullato, or indian slaves” for any reason whatsoever “except for some meritorious services,” which had to be judged and approved by the governor and council, and a license had to be applied for and approved.”¹¹ This law includes a total of 25 provisions all of which limit the rights and liberties of the enslaved. Other states will pass similar laws.

⁸ “Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly January 1637/8-September 1664,” Maryland State Archives. Retrieved 23 July 2021. <http://aomol.msa.maryland.gov/000001/000001/html/am1--534.html>

⁹ Hening, *The Statutes at large*, 2:280. <https://web.csulb.edu/~jlawler/Course%20DW/VirginiaSlaveLaws.htm> Retrieved 23 July 2021.

¹⁰ Hening, *The Statutes at large*, 2:481. <https://web.csulb.edu/~jlawler/Course%20DW/VirginiaSlaveLaws.htm>. Retrieved 23 July 2021.

¹¹ General Assembly, *An Act directing the trial of Slaves, committing capital crimes; and for the more effectual punishing conspiracies and insurrections of them; and for the better government of Negros, Mulattos, and Indians, bond or free* (1723), in *Encyclopedia Virginia* (December 7, 2020). <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/an-act-directing-the-trial-of-slaves-committing-capital-crimes-and-for-the-more-effectual-punishing-conspiracies-and-insurrections-of-them-and-for-the-better-government-of-negros-mulattos-and-in>. Retrieved 23 July 2021.

WASHINGTON'S COMPLEX VIEWS ON SLAVERY

WASHINGTON AND SLAVERY TIMELINE

The following timeline is a curated list of dates, events, and writings of Washington relating to enslaved persons and the institution of slavery. Each entry contains a brief summary of an event, a quotation excerpted from supporting text where appropriate, and a citation or link to the original source [accessed on 23 July 2021].

Analyze the timeline by investigating the selected entries. Suggested questions for your consideration include:

- What story does each entry reveal about Washington's view of enslaved persons and the institution of slavery?
- What is Washington's attitude or tone in the entry? What words or phrases support your ideas?
- Is the entry an example of a public or private action/ or opinion of Washington? Explain your answer.
- Which previous entries does the current entry support? Which does it challenge?
- Overall, what story does the timeline tell about Washington and slavery? Does it tell a single story? Explain your answer.
- What, if anything, is 'missing' from the timeline? How might this information contribute to your understanding of Washington and slavery?
- What questions do the timeline events raise for you? How might you go about finding answers to these questions?

Use evidence from the text and your own knowledge of history to support your ideas.

- 1743 April 11. George Washington, age 11, inherits 10 enslaved Negroes in his father’s will.¹ “I give unto my son George Washington and his heirs the land I now live on which I purchased of the Executrix of Mr. William Strother, deceased, and one moiety of my land lying on Deep Run and ten Negro slaves.”
- 1754 Washington rents and begins farming Mount Vernon with a workforce of about 36 slaves.²
- 1759 Washington marries Martha Dandridge Custis in January. In April, Martha arrives at Mount Vernon in April with 20 “dower” slaves inherited upon the death of her first husband from a previous marriage.³
- 1761 August 20. Washington places an advertisement in the Maryland Gazette to recapture four runaway slaves: Peros, Neptune, Cupid and Jack.⁴ “Ran away from a Plantation of the Subscriber’s, on Dogue Run in Fairfax, on Sunday the 9th Instant, the following Negroes... Whoever apprehends the said Negroes, so that the Subscriber may readily get them, shall have, if taken up in this County, Forty Shillings Reward, beside what the Law allows; and if at any greater Distance, or out of the Colony, a proportionable Recompence paid them. By George Washington”

¹ KING GEORGE COUNTY VIRGINIA WILL BOOK A-1;1721-1752 {George Harrison Sanford King}; Pages 156-161; WILL OF AUGUSTINE WASHINGTON. <https://www.colonial-settlers-md-va.us/getperson.php?personID=I022490&tree=Tree1>

² “I., 10 December 1754,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/02-01-02-0115-0002>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Colonial Series, vol. 1, 7 July 1748–14 August 1755, ed. W. W. Abbot. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983, pp. 228–229.]

³ Memorandum, “List of Artisans and Household Slaves in the Estate” [ca. 1759], Settlement of the Daniel Parke Custis Estate, Schedule III-C, *National Archives, Founders Online*, [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington, Digital Edition*]. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/doll/#1>

⁴ “Advertisement for Runaway Slaves, 11 August 1761,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/02-07-02-0038>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Colonial Series, vol. 7, 1 January 1761–15 June 1767, ed. W. W. Abbot and Dorothy Twohig. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990, pp. 65–68.] <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/02-07-02-0038>.

- 1768 Washington purchases William “Billy” Lee (and his younger brother Frank) from Mary Lee, a wealthy Virginian for £61.15s.⁵ William Lee will become Washington’s personal valet.
- 1774 August 24. Washington writes to lifelong friend, Lord Bryan Fairfax, regarding the imminent military conflict with Britain. In the letter, Washington compares the treatment of the Colonies by Britain to colonial treatment of the enslaved. “the Crisis is arrivd when we [Colonists] must assert our Rights, or Submit to every Imposition that can be heap’d upon us; till custom and use, will make us as tame, & abject Slaves, as the Blacks we Rule over with such arbitrary Sway.”⁶
- 1775 June 15. Washington is elected unanimously and appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Revolutionary Army by the Second Continental Congress on June 15 and June 17, 1775 respectively.⁷ William Lee will attend Washington throughout the war.⁸
- October. General Washington’s War Council agrees “unanimously to reject all slaves, & by a great Majority to reject Negroes altogether” from enlisting (enslaved) or reenlisting (free Negroes) in the Revolutionary Army.⁹
- December. Lord Dunmore, Governor of the Royal Virginia Colony issues a proclamation encouraging indentured servants and Negroes to join the British Army. “And I do hereby farther declare all indented servants, Negroes, or others (appertaining to rebels) free, that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining his Majesty’s troops, as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing this Colony to a proper sense of their duty, to his Majesty’s crown and dignity.”¹⁰

⁵ “Cash Accounts,” May 3, 1768, *The George Washington Financial Papers Project*. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, ed. Theodore J. Crackel (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008), n2.] <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/william-billy-lee/#1>

⁶ “From George Washington to Bryan Fairfax, 24 August 1774,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/02-10-02-0097>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Colonial Series, vol. 10, *21 March 1774–15 June 1775*, ed. W. W. Abbot and Dorothy Twohig. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995, pp. 154–156.]

⁷ Journals of the Continental Congress - Thursday, June 15, 1775 and Saturday, June 17, 1775. [https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(jc00238\)\)](https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hlaw:@field(DOCID+@lit(jc00238))):

⁸ MacLeod, Jessie. Lee, William (fl. 1768–1810). (2021, February 12). In *Encyclopedia Virginia*. <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/lee-william-fl-1768-1810>. <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/lee-william-fl-1768-1810/>

⁹ Council of War, [October 8, 1775], in *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series*, Volume 2, edited by Philander D. Chase and Dorothy Twohig (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), 123 & 125.

¹⁰ Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation 1775 <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/lord-dunmores-proclamation-1775>

December. Washington decides to allow free Negroes to enlist in the Revolutionary Army. “It has been represented to me, that the free Negroes who have served in this Army, are very much dissatisfied [sic] at being discarded. As it is to be apprehended that they may seek employ in the Ministerial Army, I have presumed to depart from the Resolution respecting them and have given license for their being enlisted, If [sic] this is disapproved by Congress I shall put a stop to it....”¹¹ However, slaves remain forbidden from joining.¹²

1778 August. Washington writes to his cousin, Lund (caretaker of Mount Vernon in Washington’s absence during the Revolutionary War) expressing a personal desire to be free of Negroes and is willing to trade enslaved Negroes for lands that he wishes to purchase. “...If Negroes could be given in Exchange for this Land of Marshalls [sic], or sold at a proportionable [sic] price, I should prefer it to the Sale of Morris[']s Land...Having so fully expressed my Sentiments concerning this manner, I shall only add a word or two respecting Barry’s Land...For this Land also I had rather give Negroes—if Negroes would do. for [sic] to be plain I wish to get quit of Negroes....”¹³

1779 February. In another letter to Lund, Washington considers the conflicting social and economic costs of selling some of his enslaved Negroes. “My scruples arise from a reluctance in offering these people at public vendue, and on account of the uncertainty of timing the sale well—In the first case, if these poor wretches are to be held in a state of slavery, I do not see that a change of masters will render it more irksome, provided husband & wife, and Parents & children are not separated from each other, which is not my intention to do... And with respect to the second, ...if a sale takes place while the money is in a depreciating state—that is, before it has arrived at the lowest ebb of depreciation; I shall lose the difference—and if it is delayed, ’till some great & important event shall give a decisive turn in favor of our affairs, it may be too late.”¹⁴

1782 May. Virginia General Assembly enacts legislation to allow the manumission (freeing) of slaves. The law allows slaveholders to free their slaves at will, without government approval. The law also orders that anyone freeing their slaves must provide support for those over or under a certain age and that slaves pay the taxes required by the state.¹⁵

¹¹ “George Washington to The President of Congress,” December 31, 1775, *The Writings of George Washington*, 4:195.

¹² “George Washington, General Orders,” February 21, 1776, *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series*, 3:350.

¹³ “George Washington to Lund Washington,” August 15, 1778, *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series*, 16:315-316.

¹⁴ “George Washington to Lund Washington,” February 24[-26], 1779, *The Writings of George Washington*, 14:147-149.

¹⁵ General Assembly, “An act to authorize the manumission of slaves” (1782). (2020, December 07). In *Encyclopedia Virginia*. <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/an-act-to-authorize-the-manumission-of-slaves-1782>.

- 1785 May 26. Washington, despite agreeing personally with the point of view, refuses to sign a petition “for the emancipation of the Negroes,” presented by Reverend Thomas Coke, the first Methodist Bishop.¹⁶ The Methodist petition, read in the Virginia legislature on November 8, 1785, was rejected two days later.¹⁷
- 1786 April 12. Washington writes to Robert Morris, Pennsylvanian delegate of the Second Continental Congress and signer of the Declaration of Independence, criticizing the antislavery Quaker Society of Friends’ lawsuit to free the slave of fellow Alexandrian shop owner, Philip Darby, as an improper and illegal method. “[T]here is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of [slavery]; but there is only one proper and effectual mode by which it can be accomplished, and that is by Legislative authority...”¹⁸
- May 10. In a letter to the Marquis de Lafayette, Washington expresses pessimism that the American people are ready to embrace emancipation and that petitioning for abolition would pose problems, despite his opinion that it should happen. “[Y]our late purchase of an estate in the colony of Cayenne, with a view to 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 scarce 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.”¹⁹
- 1788 Washington writes to the Governor of South Carolina, Charles Pickney, expressing regret that the South Carolina legislature voted to continue to allow the importation of enslaved Africans to the state. “I must say that I lament the decision of your legislature upon the question of importing Slaves after March 1793. I was in hopes that motives of policy, as well as other good reasons supported by the direful effects of Slavery which at this moment are presented, would have operated to produce a total prohibition of the importation of Slaves whenever the question came to be agitated in any State that might be interested in the measure.”²⁰
- 1789 April. Washington is inaugurated in New York City as the first President of the United States. During Washington’s presidency, at least ten enslaved people worked at the president’s houses, first in New York City and later in Philadelphia beginning in

¹⁶ Thomas Coke, *Extracts of the Journals of the Reverend Dr. Coke’s Five Visits to America* (London: Printed by G. Paramore, 1793), 45.

¹⁷ see *The Papers of George Washington, Confederation Series*, 3:357n.

¹⁸ “George Washington to Robert Morris,” April 12, 1786, *The Writings of George Washington*, 28:408.

¹⁹ “George Washington to the Marquis de Lafayette,” May 12, 1786, *The Writings of George Washington*, 28:424.

²⁰ “George Washington to Governor Charles Pinckney”, March 17, 1792, *The Writings of George Washington*, 32:6.

November 1790, including: Ona “Oney” Judge, Hercules, Moll, Giles, Austin, Richmond, Paris, Joe, Christopher Sheels, and William Lee.²¹

- 1791 April 12. To avoid Pennsylvania’s 1780 abolition law that freed enslaved people after they had lived in the state for six consecutive months, Washington instructs his personal secretary, Tobias Lear, to return the enslaved Negroes at Philadelphia to Mount Vernon, a practice Washington will continue throughout his presidency.²² “[I]n case it shall be found that any of my Slaves may, or any for them shall attempt their freedom at the expiration of six months, it is my wish and desire that you would send the whole, or such part of them as Mrs. Washington may not chuse [sic] to keep, home—for although I do not think they would be benefitted [sic] by the change, yet the idea of freedom might be too great a temptation for them to resist. At any rate it might, if they conceived they had a right to it, make them insolent in a State of Slavery.”²³ In his letter, Washington expresses his desire to “have [the removal of the slaves] accomplished under pretext that may deceive both them and the Public,” and that “these Sentiments and this advise [sic] may be known to none but yourself and Mrs. Washington.”²⁴
- 1793 February 12. President Washington signs the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 that strengthened the Fugitive Slave clause of the Constitution (Article IV, Section 2, Clause 3) to authorize the capture and return of runaway enslaved persons within the states and territories of the United States and set a fine of \$500 for anyone who helped or harbored an escaped slave.²⁵
- 1794 March 22. President Washington signs the Slave Trade Act of 1794, an early step toward ending the international slave trade that prohibited the transporting of enslaved persons from the United States to any foreign place or country, and made it illegal for American citizens to prepare a ship for purpose of importing slaves.²⁶

²¹ Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *Never Caught: The Washingtons’ Relentless Pursuit of their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge* (New York: 37INK, 2017). <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-enslaved-household-of-president-george-washington>

²² <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-enslaved-household-of-president-george-washington>

²³ “George Washington to Tobias Lear, April 12, 1791,” *The Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series*, Volume 8, edited by Mark A. Mastromarino, Jack D. Warren, Jr., and Dorothy Twohig (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 85-86.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ “*Proceedings and Debates of the House of Representatives of the United States at the Second Session of the Second Congress, Begun at the City of Philadelphia, November 5, 1792.*,” *Annals of Congress*, 2nd Congress, 2nd Session (November 5, 1792 to March 2, 1793),” Pages 1414-15. <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage>

²⁶ An Act to Prohibit the Carrying On of the Slave Trade from the United States to Any Foreign Place or Country; 3/22/1794; Public Law, 3rd Congress, 1st Session: To Prohibit the Carrying On of the Slave Trade from the United States to Any Foreign Place, March 22, 1794; Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789 - 2011; General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11; National Archives Building, Washington, DC. [Online Version, <https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/slave-trade-act-1794>, July 20, 2021]

May 6. Washington begins to express a desire to reduce his responsibilities of running Mount Vernon by leasing land to other farmers and reducing the number of enslaved persons he owns because of the increasing cost to care for them. In a letter to Tobias Lear, Washington also states a ‘private’ motivation. “Besides these, I have another motive which makes me earnestly wish for the accomplishment of these things, it is indeed more powerful than all the rest. namely [sic] to liberate a certain species of property which I possess, very repugnantly to my own feelings; but which imperious necessity compels...”²⁷

1796 May 24. Frederick Kitt, Washington’s steward, places an advertisement in The Philadelphia Gazette & Universal Daily Advertiser announcing the escape of Ona Judge, one of the dower slaves belonging to Martha as part of the Custis estate. “Absconded from the household of the President of the United States, ONEY JUDGE, a light mulatto girl, much freckled, with very black eyes and bushy black hair...” The ad was placed in other newspapers, including Claypoole’s American Daily Advertiser in Philadelphia, PA on May 27²⁸. According to the advertisement, “there was no suspicion of her going off, nor no provocation to do so...” However, in an 1845 interview, “Washington’s Runaway Slave,” printed in the Anti-Slavery Bugle in New-Lisbon, Ohio on August 22, 1845, Judge stated two reasons for her escape: “she wanted to be *free*,” and when she learned that upon Martha’s death, she was to be bequeathed to Martha’s granddaughter, Elizabeth Park Custis Law as a wedding present, Judge “was determined to never be *her* slave.”²⁹

1797 February 21 or 22, Washington’s enslaved cook, Hercules, “abscond[s]” or escapes Mount Vernon shortly before or during Washington’s 65th birthday.³⁰

March 10, Washington writes to Tobias Lear regarding the search for Hercules. “I pray you to desire Mr. Kitt (Washington’s steward) to make all the enquiry he can after Hercules, and send him round in the Vessel if he can be discovered & apprehended.”³¹

August 4. In a letter to his nephew, Lawrence Lewis, Washington expresses his opinion about enslaved persons running away and how the government might resolve the issue. “...I am sorry to hear of the loss of your servant; but it is my opinion these elopements will be MUCH MORE, before they are LESS frequent: and that the persons making

²⁷ “George Washington to Tobias Lear,” May 6, 1794, *The Writings of George Washington*, 33:358.

²⁸ “Ten Dollars Reward,” *Claypoole’s American Daily Advertiser* (Philadelphia, PA), May 27, 1796, p. 2. <https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2019/10/runaway-how-george-washington-and-other-slave-owners-used-newspapers-to-hunt-escaped-slaves/>

²⁹ “Washington’s Runaway Slave,” *Anti-Slavery Bugle* (New-Lisbon, Ohio), August 22, 1845, p. 4. <https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2019/10/runaway-how-george-washington-and-other-slave-owners-used-newspapers-to-hunt-escaped-slaves/>

³⁰ “Weekly Report, 25 February,” 1797, *Mount Vernon Farm Accounts, Jan. 7, 1797—Sept. 10, 1797* (bound photostats, Fred W. Smith National Library for the Study of George Washington, Mount Vernon, Virginia), 39.

³¹ “From George Washington to Tobias Lear, 10 March 1797,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/06-01-02-0019>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Retirement Series, vol. 1, 4 March 1797–30 December 1797, ed. W. W. Abbot. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998, pp. 27–28.]

them should never be retained, if they are recovered, as they are sure to contaminate and discontent others. I wish from my soul that the legislature of this State could see the policy of a gradual Abolition of Slavery; It would prev[en]t. much future mischief.”³²

November 13, Washington writes to his nephew, George Lewis (Lawrence’s brother), asking help to find a replacement for Hercules, specifically a particular slave that is to be sold. “The running off of my Cook, has been a most inconvenient thing to this family; and what renders it more disagreeable, is, that I had resolved never to become the master of another Slave by purchase; but this resolution I fear I must break.1 . . . Let me ask you now, to see both Mr Murray (the seller), & the man himself (the cook in question); and if upon conversing fully with the latter, you should be of opinion (from the account he gives of himself) that he is a good Cook, and would answer my purposes, then discover the lowest terms on which he could be had by purchase, or on hire.”³³

1799 July 9. Washington executes his last will and testament in which he manumits (sets free) upon his death, William Lee, and makes several other provisions regarding the enslaved that he owns or has legal control over. Washington also provides that upon Martha’s death, the rest of the enslaved that he owns outright are to be freed, acknowledging that he has no legal right to free the “dower” slaves that belong to the Custis estate (Martha and her heirs). Washington also makes provisions that his heirs are to feed and clothe for the rest of their lives any of his freed slaves that are too old, too infirm, or too young to make a living, and that the younger slaves are to be taught to read and write as well as be taught a valuable trade. Washington is the only slave owning founding father to make any such provisions in his will.³⁴

³² “George Washington to Lawrence Lewis,” August 4, 1797, *The Writings of George Washington*, 36:2.

³³ “From George Washington to George Lewis, 13 November 1797,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/06-01-02-0419>. [Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Retirement Series, vol. 1, 4 March 1797–30 December 1797, ed. W. W. Abbot. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998, pp. 469–470.]

³⁴ George Washington, “Last Will and Testament,” July 9, 1799, *The Writings of George Washington*, 37:276-277, 282-283.

Washington's Complex View of Slavery

George Washington is viewed generally as the founding father of the United States, praised for his leadership capabilities, military victories, and presidential guidance. He was essential in both the struggle for liberty and creation of independence in the new nation under the Constitution. Washington is also credited with unifying the American republic, his legacy inspiring current politicians, national leaders, and citizens of the United States.

And yet, Washington, like many of his contemporaries, inherited ten enslaved Negroes from his father, becoming a slave owner at age 11. As the Commander of the Continental Army fighting for freedom from British colonial tyranny, Washington was attended by his enslaved valet, William Lee. While negotiating rights within the new government, Washington's executive household was run by enslaved servants, including maid, Ona, and cook, Hercules. And at the time of his death in 1799, 317 enslaved persons lived and worked on Washington's Mount Vernon estate; 123 of whom belonged to Washington outright. In light of these competing narratives and conflicting identities, how should we view Washington? As a Founding Father of Liberty *and* slave owning Virginia planter, how do we reconcile our understandings of him?

Certainly the history of the United States is fraught with tensions arising from our continued struggle to form a more perfect union. Examining Washington in the context of slavery provides opportunities to explore how these tensions continue to influence us today, as well as how our debates and understandings of the nation's founding reflect who we think we are and who we want to become in the future.

This learning experience is divided into four broad activities that build on each other: Build Historical Context, Examine the Evidence, Develop a Critique, and Make Civics Connections (Culminating Activity) but is designed to allow teachers flexibility in curating activities at their discretion. Our goal is to empower students to use the lessons of Washington to employ civic engagement in their own lives and communities.

BUILD HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It is impossible to analyze Washington as a slaveholder, or his views on slavery, without first understanding the larger context of the institution as it developed in the Western Hemisphere during the European age of exploration and colonial eras.

By the time the first enslaved Africans arrive in British North America in 1619, the Transatlantic Slave Trade, led by Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands, has existed for over 150 years. According to the Transatlantic Slave Database, the Slave Trade transported more than 350,000 enslaved Africans to the Caribbean, Brazil, and the Spanish mainland Americas.¹ At the time of Washington's birth in 1732, over 60,000 enslaved Africans have been transported to the North American British colonies, which had an estimated population of between 630,000 - 650,000 persons. By 1740, there are 150,024 enslaved Africans.²

In addition, slavery has replaced indentured service as the preferred method of forced labor; enslaved Africans became the primary source. Throughout the colonies, legislation codifies life-long chattel slavery for imported Africans and birth-slavery for their American-born descendants; severely restricts manumission, or the freeing of persons from enslavement; prohibits intermarriage between Africans and Europeans; and strips the rights of the enslaved to own property and weapons, trade, travel, marry, and even to learn to read and write.

The forced labor of Africans is used to transform the physical landscape of colonial British North America (clear forests, drain swamps, build fortifications and roads); to perform the agricultural work of maintaining crops and livestock; and to perform service duties as maids, cooks, porters, coachmen, laundress, blacksmiths, etc. In fact, the entirety of the economic prosperity of the British colonies comes to rely heavily upon the free labor of the enslaved Africans and their descendants. The institution of slavery is built by law into the political fabric and socioeconomic culture of what will become the United States of America.

It is into this world that George Washington is born.

Suggested questions for your consideration include:

- What story does the timeline/introduction tell about the development of slavery as an institution in the Western Hemisphere?
- What specific laws stand out to you? Why?
- What connection(s) can you make to the relationship of these laws as part of America's "hard history" and present day conflicts/contemporary debates in society?
- How does the timeline/introduction inform your understanding of George Washington as a member of his society?

Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.

¹ <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#tables>. Retrieved 23 July 2021.

² <https://www.monticello.org/slavery-at-monticello/african-slavery-british-north-america/africans-british-north-america>. Retrieved 23 July 2021.

A People with Contemporary Debates & Possibilities — Discussion Questions DEVELOP A CRITIQUE

This theme explores the contemporary terrain of civic participation and civic agency, investigating how historical narratives shape current political arguments, how values and information shape policy arguments, and how the American people continue to renew or remake themselves in pursuit of fulfillment of the promise of constitutional democracy.

The following are a series of history and civics discussion prompts. Select one prompt from each category (or as directed by your instructor) to engage in a critical discussion with your peers that is grounded in the historical context of slavery and historical actions of Washington, incorporates your own understanding and knowledge of history and civics, and reflects civic friendship and civil disagreement as appropriate.

HISTORY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Does Washington's ideology change over time? If so, how? What evidence supports your answer?
- To what extent did Washington's actions transform American political institutions? To what extent do his actions maintain the status quo?
- How can your learning from the Washington and Slavery timeline suggest strategies for how to address our shared contemporary problem of systemic and institutionalized racism against persons of African descent?
- Did Washington at the time know that he was making mistakes regarding enslaved people and the institution of slavery?
- How can we use Washington's historical actions to investigate future uncertainty and fallibility with regard to our own civic participation? What mistakes should we seek to avoid?

CIVIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What specific methods did Washington use to adapt and/or preserve his society regarding the enslaved and institution of slavery? What were the strengths and limitations of the methods he chose? What are the strengths and limitations as we look towards challenges in the future?
- How can we balance critical and constructive engagement with our history of the institution of slavery and still be proud to be Americans?

Use evidence from the text and from your own knowledge and understanding of history and civics to support your ideas.

This theme explores the idea of “the people” as a political concept--not just a group of people who share a landscape, but a group of people who share political ideals and institutions. The theme explores the history of how the contemporary American people has taken shape as a political body and builds civic understanding about shared processes of societal decision-making.

The theme also explores the challenge of “e pluribus unum”: forging one political people out of diverse experiences.

The following are a series of history and civics discussion prompts. Select one prompt from each category (or as directed by your instructor) to engage in a critical discussion with your peers that is grounded in the historical context of slavery and historical actions of Washington, incorporates your own understanding and knowledge of history and civics, and reflects civic friendship and civil disagreement as appropriate.

HISTORY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What were the opportunities of diversity within colonial America and the early American republic? What were the challenges?
- Based on the Slavery in Context and Washington and Slavery resources, what distinctive challenges have accompanied race relations in the United States? What were/are the causes and consequences of enslaved peoples’ marginalization from participation in the process of government?
- In the wake of the informal founding through laws and actions prior to the American Revolution and the formal founding through the Declaration and Constitution, how have understandings of American membership and unity changed over time, with specific regard to people of African descent and other enslaved persons?

CIVICS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How did Washington understand the perspectives of others and build bridges between between different points of view regarding the institution of slavery?
- What are the tensions between Washington’s responsibility to the larger American community versus Washinton’s commitment to his own estate? Are these different? If so, how? If not, why not. Explain.
- How can we understand Washington’s personal values, principles, commitments, and community responsibilities with respect to enslaved persons and the institution of slavery? How do these relate to the shared values, principles, and commitments that define “We the People of the United States of America”?

Use evidence from the text and from your own knowledge and understanding of history and civics to support your ideas.

Make Civics Connections

CULMINATING ACTIVITY

Now that you have investigated and critically analyzed Washington, how can you apply your understanding to exercise civic engagement in your own lives and communities?

Consider and answer the following compelling questions:

- What contemporary collective actions, beliefs, policies, etc., would be condemned by society in 200 years? Explain.
- What can you do about it? (What actions can you take to solve the problem?)

Where appropriate, take some time to reflect and to write down your ideas.

Discuss your ideas with your learning community as directed by your teacher.

Complete the culminating or summative activity as directed by the teacher. Remember to follow the appropriate conventions and to use any provided guidelines, rubrics, and/or resources to ensure that you fulfill the requirements.