

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S VIEWS ON SLAVERY

LEVEL:

High School

TIMERAME:

Approximately one class session

OBJECTIVES:

- Students will analyze documents that present multiple perspectives on a central issue; specifically, public versus private perspectives and change over time.
- Students will understand the societal, cultural, and economic conditions of 18th-century American life that sustained the institution of slavery.
- Students will explore the relationship between George Washington and his slaves.

STANDARDS:

- Revolution and the New Nation
- Colonization and Settlement
- Writing an argumentative essay
- Reading and Writing Literacy in History/Social Studies
- Reading Informational Texts
- Evaluating Sources
- Reading for Perspective
- Speaking and Listening
- Critique the usefulness of historical sources for a specific inquiry.

PROCEDURE:

- 1 Warm-Up Activity:
 - a) Review ground rules for discussing difficult topics, such as slavery, previously established in your classroom.
 - b) Ask the class to write down individual answers to the essential question: *What were George Washington's views on slavery?*
 - c) Discuss with the class why primary source documents are important for studying history. Be sure to address the limitations and opportunities for reading words written during the time period you are studying during the discussion.
 - d) As a class, read and source *Excerpt - George Washington to Lawrence Lewis, August 4, 1797* (included in PDF), paying close attention to the following questions:
 - When it was written?
 - Who is the audience for the document?
 - Is it reliable source to answer the question: *What were George Washington's views on Slavery?*
 - e) Discuss, as a group, what students believe Washington's perspective on slavery was based on this document alone. Did reading this primary source change their view from what they wrote down earlier?

2. Analysis of Historical Records:

- a) Break students into small groups and provide each group with the *Background Information - George Washington's Views on Slavery* and the *Primary Sources* PDF (both). Remind students to assess the reliability of each source as they analyze it for content information.
- b) Instruct students to use the documents provided, as well as their prior knowledge, to consider and discuss the following essential question in their small groups: *What were George Washington's views on slavery?* Allow for 20-30 minutes for groups to review evidence.
- c) Ask each group to create an evidenced-based thesis statement that answers the essential question: *What were George Washington's views on slavery?* As a group, students should cite evidence from at least 3 sources provided.
- d) Instruct groups to share their statements and evidence with the class. Each group should try to come to consensus; however, if there is disagreement, ask individuals within the group to provide evidence of their differing points of view.
- e) Instruct students to write an argumentative essay on their own citing evidence from the set of sources that answers the essential question: *What were George Washington's views on slavery?* The thesis statement developed by the group can be used to guide the essay, or a differing point of view can be expressed, argued, and supported with evidence from the document packet.

IMPORTANT NOTES:

This lesson is designed for use in a classroom that has already introduced the events of the late 18th century (the Founding of the U.S. Government, Slavery in the Colonies, etc.) to students. Students should have prior knowledge of how to approach primary sources, and the sensitivity and respect required to talk about the topic of slavery. In addition to the content covered, this lesson also presumes a previous discussion on the following topics:

- Define and model for students a practice of historical thinking strategies and provide context for how analyzing sources such as the ones included in this lesson are part of the overall practice of doing history. In developing this activity, Mount Vernon used the C3 Framework's model of historical thinking. See page 45 of the C3 Frameworks: <https://www.socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/c3/c3-framework-for-social-studies-rev0617.pdf>
- The topic of slavery and discussing the lives of people enslaved in the 18th century is an emotional topic in the classroom. Procedures for ensuring a safe and tolerant environment for open dialogue and engagement should be a part of classroom culture. Students should be reminded of this respectful environment that still encourages inquiry while participating in this lesson. Mount Vernon uses the Four Truths model of acknowledging and validating differing perspectives in our workshops. For more information, see page 110 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report: <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/finalreport/Volume%201.pdf>
- It is important that students are prepared to encounter unknown results when participating in this activity. Mount Vernon scholars have not determined a conclusive or "right" answer to the essential question posed in this activity. Preparing students for this ambiguous result is instructive for helping students understand the challenges and opportunities in historical thinking strategies.
- Historians at George Washington's Mount Vernon have looked at the same evidence that is provided in this lesson and drawn the conclusions published on the following website: <http://www.mountvernon.org/digital-encyclopedia/article/george-washington-and-slavery/>

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

George Washington owned slaves from the time he was 11. At the time of his death, he owned, rented, or managed over 300 enslaved individuals, and in his will, he gave direct instructions on how his family should free many of them after his death. During his life, he created a number of written documents, including his will, that reflected his ideas and actions related to slavery. Both policy decisions (as commander in chief and president) and private correspondence make up these documents available to people today.

NOTE: Scholars do not agree on Washington's views on slavery. This lesson is designed to make you draw conclusions from the evidence presented; there is no correct answer.

PRIMARY SOURCE: GEORGE WASHINGTON'S VIEWS ON SLAVERY
COMMENT BY GEORGE WASHINGTON, RECORDED BY DAVID HUMPHRIES IN HIS *THE LIFE OF GENERAL WASHINGTON*, 1787-1788

1 The unfortunate condition of the persons, whose labour in part I employed, has been the only
2 unavoidable subject of regret. To make the Adults among them as easy & as comfortable in their
3 circumstances as their actual state of ignorance & improvidence would admit; & to lay a
4 foundation to prepare the rising generation for a destiny different from that in which they were
5 born; afforded some satisfaction to my mind, & could not I hoped be displeasing to the justice of
6 the Creator.

1 [Mount Vernon, 9 July 1799]

2 (Ite)m Upon the decease (of) my wife, it is my Will & desire th(at) all the Slaves which I hold in
3 (my) *own right*, shall receive their free(dom). To emancipate them during (her) life, would, tho' earnestly
4 wish(ed by) me, be attended with such insu(pera)ble difficulties on account of thei(r interm)ixture by
5 Marriages with the (dow)er Negroes, as to excite the most pa(in)ful sensations, if not disagreeabl(e
6 c)onsequences from the latter, while (both) descriptions are in the occupancy (of) the same Proprietor; it
7 not being (in) my power, under the tenure by which (th)e Dower Negroes are held, to man(umi)t them.
8 And whereas among (thos)e who will recieve freedom ac(cor)ding to this devise, there may b(e so)me,
9 who from old age or bodily infi(rm)ities, and others who on account of (the)ir infancy, that will be unable
10 to (su)pport themselves; it is m(y Will and de)sire that all who (come under the first) & second
11 descrip(tion shall be comfor)tably cloathed & (fed by my heirs while) they live; and that such of the latter
12 description as have no parents living, or if living are unable, or unwilling to provide for them, shall be
13 bound by the Court until they shall arrive at the ag(e) of twenty five years; and in cases where no record
14 can be produced, whereby their ages can be ascertained, the judgment of the Court, upon its own view of
15 the subject, shall be adequate and final. The Negroes thus bound, are (by their Masters or Mistresses) to be
16 taught to read & write; and to be brought up to some useful occupation, agreeably to the Laws of the
17 Commonwealth of Virginia, providing for the support of Orphan and other poor Children. and I do hereby
18 expressly forbid the Sale, or transportation out of the said Commonwealth, of any Slave I may die
19 possessed of, under any pretence whatsoever. And I do moreover most pointedly, and most solemnly
20 enjoin it upon my Executors hereafter named, or the Survivors of them, to see that *th(is cla)use* respecting
21 Slaves, and every part thereof be religiously fulfilled at the Epoch at which it is directed to take place;
22 without evasion, neglect or delay, after the Crops which may then be on the ground are harvested,
23 particularly as it respects the aged and infirm; seeing that a regular and permanent fund be established for
24 their support so long as there are subjects requiring it; not trusting to the (u)ncertain provision to be made
25 by individuals. And to my Mulatto man William (calling himself William Lee) I give immediate freedom;
26 or if he should prefer it (on account of the accidents which ha(v)e befallen him, and which have rendered
27 him incapable of walking or of any active employment) to remain in the situation he now is, it shall be
28 optional in him to do so: In either case however, I allow him an annuity of thirty dollars during his natural
29 life, whic(h) shall be independent of the victuals and cloaths he has been accustomed to receive, if he
30 chuses the last alternative; but in full, with his freedom, if he prefers the first; & this I give him as a
31 test(im)ony of my sense of his attachment to me, and for his faithful services during the Revolutionary
32 War.

1 The Money arising from the Sales [of flour] I would have laid out in Negroes, if choice ones
2 can be had under Forty pounds Sterl.; if not, then in Rum & Sugar from Barbadoes, or any of the
3 Windward Islands; and Sugar & Molasses if the Flour shd be sold in Jama [Jamaica].

4 If the Return's are in Slaves let there be two thirds of them Males, the other third Females—
5 The former not exceeding (at any rate) 20 yrs of age—the latter 16—All of them to be strait
6 Limb'd, & in every respect strong & likely, with good Teeth & good Countenances—to be
7 sufficiently provided with Cloaths.

- 1 ...I never mean (unless some particular circumstances should compel me to it) to possess another
- 2 slave by purchase; it being among my first wishes to see some plan adopted by the Legislature
- 3 by which slavery in this Country may be abolished by slow, sure, & imperceptible degrees.

1 ...in case it shall be found that any of my Slaves may, or any for them shall attempt their
2 freedom at the expiration of six months, it is my wish and desire that you would send the whole,
3 or such part of them as Mrs. Washington may not chuse to keep, home—for although I do not
4 think they would be benefitted by the change, yet the idea of freedom might be too great a
5 temptation for them to resist. At any rate it might, if they conceived they had a right to it, make
6 them insolent in a State of Slavery. As all except Hercules and Paris are dower negroes, it
7 behoves me to prevent the emancipation of them, otherwise I shall not only loose the use of
8 them, but may have them to pay for. If upon taking good advise it is found expedient to send
9 them back to Virginia, I wish to have it accomplished under pretext that may deceive both them
10 and the Public;—and none I think would so effectually do this, as Mrs. Washington coming to
11 Virginia next month (towards the middle or latter end of it, as she seemed to have a wish to do) if
12 she can accomplish it by any convenient and agreeable means, with the assistance of the Stage
13 Horses &c. This would naturally bring her maid and Austin—and Hercules under the idea of
14 coming home to Cook whilst we remained there, might be sent on in the Stage. [...] I request that
15 these Sentiments and this advise may be known to none but yourself & Mrs. Washington

Mount Vernon July 2d 1766.

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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, & bring me in return for him

One Hhd of best Molasses

One Ditto of best Rum

One Barrl of Lymes—if good & 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 & 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 & 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 & trim'd up a little when offerd to Sale.

I shall very chearfully allow you the customary Commissions on this affair, and must beg the favour of you (least 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 & speedy return, being Sir, Yr Very Hble Servt

Go: Washington