

WASHINGTON AND MOUNT VERNON AS NATIONAL SYMBOLS OF LIBERTY AND ENSLAVEMENT

Both Reverend Richard Allen and abolitionist Frederick Douglass made speeches that connected Washington's legacy to events in American history, but each did so differently. This lesson will compare and contrast Allen's and Douglass's speeches that reflect on Washington and enslavement.

LEVEL:

High School and College

TIMEFRAME:

Approximately one class session

STANDARDS:

- Debate
- Primary Source Analysis
- Speaking and Listening
- Antebellum History
- Civics

EAD THEME:

We the People

QUESTIONS:

- How did the speakers show the connections between the American Revolution and George Washington, but also depict the communities they represented?
- How does the history of enslavement and its legacy in the United States influence America as a civic community?

OBJECTIVES:

- Students will analyze and compare two sources from the early U.S. that reflect on Washington's enslavement of people and relationship with the institution of slavery;
 - Students will compare the style, tone, and arguments in sources in order to appreciate divergent opinions about the history and symbolic meaning of Washington and Mount Vernon;
 - Students will debate how we should think about Washington;
 - Students will reflect on and discuss how we should understand our shared national history of inequalities and injustices influences, and how this understanding influences our current civic responsibilities.
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PLAN:**Engage:**

- Have students write down or share an event from the past that is used by public figures to connect people to modern events. Do some examples divide? Do some unite?

Explore:

- Explain the history behind this lesson. Start by saying that after Washington's death, Reverend Richard Allen spoke:
 - "The name of Washington will live when the sculptured marble and statue of bronze shall be crumbled into dust — for it is the decree of the eternal God that 'the righteous shall be had in everlasting remembrance, but the memorial of the wicked shall rot.'"
- Five decades later in commemoration of July Fourth, Frederick Douglass spoke:
 - "Washington could not die till he had broken the chains of his slaves. Yet his monument is built up by the price of human blood, and the traders in the bodies and souls of men shout — "We have Washington to *our father*." — Alas! that it should be so; yet so it is."
- Allen and Douglass had different interpretations of Washington's relationship with slavery and of what this history meant for the future of the country.
- Allen believed that Washington's will reflected his opposition to slavery, which was the same spirit of liberty that had motivated the Revolution. He thought Washington should be an inspiration for all Americans.
- Douglass suggested that Washington's emancipation of his slaves came too late.
- Both, however, emphasized that Washington was a national symbol whose decisions and character were very important. They believed that citizens' interpretations and responses to Washington mattered.

Explain/Evaluate:

Raise the following question: *Do we need national symbols (in the form of monuments, holidays, and patriotic sites) based on our history in order to lead successful civic lives and have an effective national community?*

- This activity asks students to develop their own thoughts about this question and work with a team to build an argument in the affirmative or in the negative.
 - To do so, each team should identify at least five arguments in support of their position *and* try to identify three strong arguments that the other team might raise.
- As students formulate their arguments, tell them to consider how the complexity of Washington as a national symbol influences their thinking.

- They can draw on evidence from Allen and Douglass to do so, as well as from their knowledge on contemporary debates about monuments, school curricula, and historical symbols

Extend:

- Washington's death led to an outpouring of eulogies. A large number of these are [archived by Mount Vernon and catalogued here](#). Many of these are searchable and available in digital form online. Students can compare Allen's eulogy with other eulogies for Washington. What is similar or different? If a student could teleport to 1799 and write a eulogy for Washington for an 18th-century audience, what would it look like?
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OTHER RESOURCES

<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/george-washingtons-farewell-address/>

<https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/ten-facts-about-washington-slavery/>

<https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/george-washingtons-will/>

WASHINGTON AS NATIONAL SYMBOL

During his lifetime and afterlife, George Washington has been one of the—if not *the*—most important national symbolic figures in the United States. In the decades after his death, his plantation and mansion, Mount Vernon, became the most popular national tourist site for Americans—for many foreign visitors too. Meanwhile, George Washington seemed like perhaps the one symbol that could unite the national community so that it could overcome the internal divisions that threatened to tear it apart between national Independence (1783) and the Civil War (1861-1865).

Visitors and others who consumed the many books, articles, lectures, or art about Washington often believed that he exemplified the special qualities of dignity, fair-mindedness, fortitude, and sense of duty that had made the Revolution and Founding successful, and which everyone should aspire to. Military officer Henry Lee named Washington, “First in war—first in peace—and first in the hearts of his countrymen.” At the same time, others questioned or challenged Washington’s status as a national symbol. For instance, abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass, recognized that Washington did free the enslaved people he owned at Mount Vernon, but also that Washington’s “monument is built up by the price of human blood.” The stakes of Washington as a national symbol have changed since the late nineteenth century. But interest in Washington as a national symbol and debates about what he symbolizes have continued to matter to Americans into the 21st century.

These learning resources explore Washington’s meaning and influence as a national symbol. Some of these sources are in Washington’s own words, but most are in the words or art of others. These sources show how and why Washington was a national symbol during his life and after his death. More important, they help students analyze the civics question of how Americans have related to Washington as a national symbol. This will support students as they think critically about how our relationship with the nation’s history and its symbols both reflects and influences our identity and civic life as a people.

The sources in this lesson have the potential to engage students with four major civics themes:

- The importance of understanding and commemorating our history as a type of **civic participation**
- The complexity and stakes of recognizing the shared history of **we the people**
- The dynamic between national identity and the roles played by the **U.S. in the world**

WASHINGTON AS NATIONAL SYMBOL

- The connection between understanding history and civic engagement with **contemporary debates and possibilities.**

With this Learning Resource, the History Questions aim to stir classroom analysis of the primary sources, and the Civics Questions to help students apply those insights about history to our contemporary context. The Civics Activity asks students to engage with opposing interpretations about American history.

GEORGE WASHINGTON TO JAMES MADISON, MAY 12, 1789

1 At this time it may not be improper to speak a little on the late mournful event — an event in
2 which we participate in common with the feelings of a grateful people — an event which causes
3 "the land to mourn" in a season of festivity. Our father and friend is taken from us — he whom
4 the nations honoured is "seen of men no more."

5 We, my friends, have particular cause to bemoan our loss. To us he has been the sympathising
6 friend and tender father. He has watched over us, and viewed our degraded and afflicted state
7 with compassion and pity — his heart was not insensible to our sufferings. He whose wisdom
8 the nations revered thought we had a right to liberty. Unbiased by the popular opinion of the
9 state in which is the memorable Mount Vernon — he dared to do his duty, and wipe off the only
10 stain with which man could ever reproach him.

11 And it is now said by an authority on which I rely, that he who ventured his life in battles, whose
12 "head was covered" in that day, and whose shield the "Lord of hosts" was, did not fight for that
13 liberty which he desired to withhold from others — the bread of oppression was not sweet to his
14 taste, and he "let the oppressed go free" — he "undid every burden" — he provided lands and
15 comfortable accommodations for them when he kept this "acceptable fast to the Lord" — that
16 those who had been slaves might rejoice in the day of their deliverance.

17 If he who broke the yoke of British burdens "from off the neck of the people" of this land, and
18 was hailed his country's deliverer, by what name shall we call him who secretly and almost
19 unknown emancipated his "bondmen and bondwomen" — became to them a father, and gave
20 them an inheritance!

21 Deeds like these are not common. He did not let "his right hand know what his left hand did" —
22 but he who "sees in secret will openly reward" such acts of beneficence.

23 The name of Washington will live when the sculptured marble and statue of bronze shall be
24 crumbled into dust — for it is the decree of the eternal God that "the righteous shall be had in
25 everlasting remembrance, but the memorial of the wicked shall rot."

26 ...

27 And here let me intreat you always to bear in mind the affectionate farewell advice of the great
28 Washington — "to love your country — to obey its laws — to seek its peace — and to keep
29 yourselves from attachment to any foreign nation."

30 Your observance of these short and comprehensive expressions will make you good citizens —
31 and greatly promote the cause of the oppressed and shew to the world that you hold dear the
32 name of George Washington.

33 May a double portion of his spirit rest on all the officers of the government in the United States,
34 and all that say my Father, my Father — the chariots of Israel, and the horsemen thereof, which
35 is the whole of the American people.

36 G. Washington

Language guide:

- is "seen of men no more" = no longer exists
- not insensible to our sufferings = cared about our suffering
- the bread of oppression was not sweet to his taste = he did not like enslaving people

Useful vocabulary:

- Mournful
- bemoan
- ventured
- deliverance
- comprehensive



FREDERICK DOUGLASS, “WHAT TO THE SLAVE IS THE FOURTH OF JULY?” (JULY 5, 1852, ROCHESTER, NY CORINTHIAN HALL)

1 Citizens, your fathers made good that resolution [to be free]. They succeeded; and to-day you
2 reap the fruits of their success. The freedom gained is yours; and you, therefore, may properly
3 celebrate this anniversary. The 4th of July is the first great fact in your nation’s history — the very
4 ring-bolt in the chain of your yet undeveloped destiny.

5 Pride and patriotism, not less than gratitude, prompt you to celebrate and to hold it in perpetual
6 remembrance. I have said that the Declaration of Independence is the ring-bolt to the chain of
7 your nation’s destiny; so, indeed, I regard it. The principles contained in that instrument are
8 saving principles. Stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against
9 all foes, and at whatever cost.

10 ...

11 Fellow Citizens, I am not wanting in respect for the fathers of this republic. The signers of the
12 Declaration of Independence were brave men. They were great men too — great enough to give
13 fame to a great age. It does not often happen to a nation to raise, at one time, such a number of
14 truly great men. The point from which I am compelled to view them is not, certainly, the most
15 favorable; and yet I cannot contemplate their great deeds with less than admiration. They were
16 statesmen, patriots and heroes, and for the good they did, and the principles they contended for, I
17 will unite with you to honor their memory.

18 ...

19 We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future. To all
20 inspiring motives, to noble deeds which can be gained from the past, we are welcome. But now is
21 the time, the important time. Your fathers have lived, died, and have done their work, and have
22 done much of it well. You live and must die, and you must do your work. You have no right to
23 enjoy a child’s share in the labor of your fathers, unless your children are to be blest by your
24 labors. You have no right to wear out and waste the hard-earned fame of your fathers to cover
25 your indolence. Sydney Smith tells us that men seldom eulogize the wisdom and virtues of their
26 fathers, but to excuse some folly or wickedness of their own. This truth is not a doubtful one.
27 There are illustrations of it near and remote, ancient and modern. It was fashionable, hundreds of
28 years ago, for the children of Jacob to boast, we have “Abraham to our father,” when they had
29 long lost Abraham’s faith and spirit. That people contented themselves under the shadow of
30 Abraham’s great name, while they repudiated the deeds which made his name great. Need I
31 remind you that a similar thing is being done all over this country to-day? Need I tell you that the
32 Jews are not the only people who built the tombs of the prophets, and garnished the sepulchres
33 of the righteous? Washington could not die till he had broken the chains of his slaves. Yet his
34 monument is built up by the price of human blood, and the traders in the bodies and souls of
35 men shout — “We have Washington to *our father*.” — Alas! that it should be so; yet so it is.
36

37 *The evil that men do, lives after them, The good is oft-interred with their bones.*

38
39 Fellow-citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here to-day? What
40 have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of
41 political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended
42 to us? and am I, therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to
43 confess the benefits and express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your
44 independence to us?

45
46 ...

47
48 But, such is not the state of the case. I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am
49 not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the
50 immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed
51 in common. — The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed
52 by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me.

53
54 ...

55
56 Fellow-citizens; above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions! whose
57 chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are, to-day, rendered more intolerable by the jubilee shouts
58 that reach them... I shall see, this day, and its popular characteristics, from the slave's point of
59 view. Standing, there, identified with the American bondman, making his wrongs mine, I do not
60 hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked
61 blacker to me than on this 4th of July! Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the
62 professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting.
63 America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the
64 future

Useful Vocabulary:

Indolence
Repudiate
Garnished
Sepulchres
Tumultuous
jubilee
grievous
embodied
devout
ring-bolt
solemnly



[Frederick Douglass during his 1869 visit to Mount Vernon.](#)