

## ***Martha Washington's Garnets: Many Strands from One Object***

### **Students will learn...**

- To use objects as a primary source
- To see many possible interpretations from one source/object

### **You will need...**

- Pictures of Martha Washington's garnets- [necklace 1](#), [necklace 2](#), [earrings](#), [etc.](#)
- Big garnet necklace template
- Handouts for the different aspects of Martha's garnets

Clarify that interpreting means to explain/ describe something to others and that one object can be interpreted in many ways.

- Divide the students into 5 groups and give them one of the aspects of Martha's garnets.

- Mineralogy and Symbolism
- World economy
- Fashion
- Washington's Finances
- Biography (assign the 3 together)

### ***Opener: Analyzing Objects***

- Ask students to think of one personal item they would preserve for history that best describes them.
- *Optional:* Assign this as homework and have them bring in that object.
- Use some of their suggestions to think about what future generations could imply about the person who owned that object without any context.
- Show pictures of Martha's garnets without telling them who owned it. What can they imply about the owner of those jewels?
- Reveal it is Martha's jewelry. Ask if this is in keeping with the way they normally view Martha? Are they surprised? Why?
- Formulate some questions that the students have about the garnets.

- Give each group a circle on which to write their interpretation of the garnets- a few sentences to a paragraph with what they believe is most important information to know about the garnets based on their topic.
- *Optional:* Let them use devices to conduct further research.

### ***Closer: Presentation***

- Have each group come up and present.
- Put the garnets together to form a necklace to display in the class.
- Ask the class what they learned about Martha Washington from her jewelry.
- Emphasize that objects have significance for a variety of reasons- for Martha the necklace could have been special because of its cost or for its connections to Patsy. When studying history, remind them to observe how objects are used to tell a story, and think about what interpretations are missing.

### ***Task: Interpreting Different Strands***

- Explain that they will each be interpreting Martha's garnets through different lenses.



## Martha Washington's Garnets

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Item: Garnet necklace

Retailer: Susanna Passavant

Date: 1756

Geography: retailed- England; probably  
made- France

Material: Silver, gold, rhodolite garnet





Item: Garnet Earrings

Maker: J. Grymes

Date: various- 1760

Geography: retailed- England; probably  
made- England

Material: Silver, gold, garnet



Item: Garnet Pin

Retailer: unknown

Date: various- 1759-1772

Geography: retailed- England; probably  
made- England

Material: Silver, garnet





Item: Garnet Set

Retailer: various

Date: various- 1759-1772

Geography: retailed- England; probably  
made- France and England

Material: Silver, gold, garnet

# Mineralogy and Symbolism: Garnets

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Instructions: Interpret Martha Washington's garnets through the lens of mineralogy and symbolism.

## Key points

- Garnets are not one specific gem but a large group of gems that share a common structure.
- Most people think of garnets as red but they can be many different colors- green, yellow, brown, black, and pink.
- Red garnets are more common and harder than other forms of garnets.
- Red garnets are often used for jewelry because they are common and do not have many visible flaws, making them relatively inexpensive.
- Martha Washington's garnets are made of rhodolite garnets, these can be rose pink, raspberry-red, or a purplish-red.
- The word 'garnet' is thought to have come from the Latin word "granum" meaning seed or grain, because of its resemblance to pomegranate seeds.
- Garnets are found in many places throughout the world, but garnets became popular for jewelry in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries when Bohemia (the modern-day Czech Republic) was the lead miner and cutter of garnets.
- Garnets are January's birthstone and are given on second anniversaries.
- Garnets are found as far back as the Bronze Age and 3000 BC in Egyptian tombs. They were also very popular with the Ancient Romans.
- In Judeo-Christian belief, a garnet was supposed to have been used like a lantern to light Noah's Ark.
- In ancient Saxon and Celtic tradition, garnets were worn by kings because they were thought to have the power to protect their wearers from harm. Other cultures such as Jewish, Christian, and Muslim warriors wore garnets into battle for the same reason.
- Some Native American healers also believed that garnets could protect the wearer from poison and injuries.

- Other cultures like the Hunza warriors from Kashmir, India used garnets as arrows and bullets, because they thought they cause especially bloody wounds. Likewise, in the Middle Ages, garnets were seen as symbols of Christ's blood and wounds.
- Due to their red color, most cultures associate them with blood and the heart. Therefore, some believed that garnets can protect for heart from sadness and make you brave, or that they prevent hemorrhaging and improve blood circulation.
- Garnets have also been associated with love and friendship, although usually in a sinister way. For example, a Greek myth recounts how Hades, tricked Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, goddess of the harvest and vegetation, into eating pomegranate seeds. By eating food from the Underworld, she was then bound to return to their for 6 months every year to be Hades' queen. Her mother is so sad to have her gone during those times that nothing on earth grows, which is why we have winter. This may also be why garnets are associated with the safe return of friends or travelers.

Places for further Research:

GIA: Garnet

GIA: Garnet History and Lore

International Gem Society (IGS): Garnet

International Gem Society (IGS): Rhodolite Garnet

International Gem Society (IGS): Garnet Symbolism

American Gem Society: January Birthstone

Gem Select: Rhodolite Garnet

# Fashion: Garnets

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Instructions: Interpret Martha Washington's garnets through the lens of 18th-century fashion.

## Key points

- Martha and George Washington used the merchant house Robert Cary and Company to sell their tobacco and then use that money to buy them English goods. Although Martha would say what she wanted, it would be Robert Cary or his assistants who went to the jewelers and picked out the actual pieces.
- Martha Washington had a large fortune after the death of her first husband, Daniel Custis, and so could buy the best things. However, although she liked pieces of good quality, she was not always concerned about having the best materials. For example, she wore paste stones instead of real diamonds and garnets, which were relatively inexpensive.
- Martha was always careful not to dress too lavishly, especially during George Washington's Presidency, between 1789-1797.
- Garnets were very popular in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. Most gems were mined and cut in Bohemia (modern-day Czech), which thrived on the industry.
- France and England were still the centers of fashion for American women in the 1700s.
- In 1700, the brilliant cut was invented. This is a way of cutting gems so that there are numerous flat surfaces (or facets). This let the light hit the gem at many different angles, causing it to shine brighter. The 18th-century thus became known as the age of gems.
- Garnets were often set into gold or silver foil to make it shine more clearly. A gem's shininess was important because, without electric lighting, dinner parties or balls were quite dark. People wanted their gems to catch and reflect the candlelight to stand out.
- A popular necklace style at the time was a 'collar' necklace. A collar necklace is short and fits close to the wearer's neck. Today, this style is referred to as a "chocker."
- Garnets were not only used for earrings and necklaces. Martha ordered many garnet hairpins and an egret. An egret (named after a white heron) or aigrette (the French term) is a hair ornament pinned to feathers.



- Jewelry changed throughout time to match the most current fashions. For example, Martha's garnet hair ornament was later transformed into a brooch by her granddaughter, Martha Custis Peter.

Places for further Research:

Martha Washington

The Style of Martha Washington

Bohemian Garnet Jewellery

Brouwer's "At the Plume of Feathers"

# World Economy: Garnets

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Instructions: Interpret Martha Washington's garnets through the lens of the world economy.

## Key points

- In the 18th and 19th century, Bohemia (the modern-day Czech Republic) was the main suppliers and cutters of garnets.
- Martha Washington's 1759 garnet necklace's style and mounting suggest that it was made in Paris.
- Yet, Martha Washington's 1759 garnet necklace was sold in Susanna Passavant's shop, the Plume of Feathers, in Ludgate Hill, London. It sold "Toys, Plate, Jewells & Jewellers Work<sup>1</sup>" from 1748 to 1762.
- The Washingtons bought things from Susanna Passavant through their London agent's Robert Cray and Company. They were only a five-minute walk away.
- Martha Washington had used the merchant house Robert Cary and Company to sell products abroad and use the money to buy English goods since her first marriage to Daniel Custis. After Martha married George, they continued to use the company to sell tobacco.
- A ship called *Cornwall* was sent to Virginia in 1759 with goods from the Plume of Feathers, including jewelry.
- On February 13th, 1764, Robert Cary and Company invoiced Washington for a pair of garnet earrings, a garnet hoop ring, and a garnet necklace, but it wasn't delivered until 1768.
- Martha Washington's other garnet pieces came from other makers and retailers, but research on them still needs to be done. For example, the retailers J. Grymes, Benjamin Gurdon & Son, and Vincent Mitchell.

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<sup>1</sup> trade-card/print, *Trade card of Susanna Passavant, goldsmith*, British Museum, London

Places for further Research:

Robert Cary and Company

Founder's Online : Search Passavant and Robert Cary

Passavant's Trade Card

Brouwer's "At the Plume of Feathers"

Bohemian Garnet Jewellery



# Martha's Biography: Garnets

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Instructions: Interpret Martha Washington's garnets through the lens of the biography of Martha Washington.

## Key points

- Martha Custis was the wealthiest widow in Virginia when her first husband, Daniel Custis died in 1757. When she married George Washington in 1759, she brought with her a fortune.
- From her first marriage, Martha had four children- John (Jack) Parke Custis, Martha (Patsy) Parke Custis and two children that died as toddlers. She never had any children with George Washington.
- After marrying Washington, Martha supervised the education of her children and made sure that the domestic operations on the plantation ran smoothly.
- Between 1759 and 1772, Martha and Patsy placed six orders for jewelry made with garnets.
- Patsy died on June 19th, 1773 at 17 years old and when Martha was only 42.
- When describing Patsy's death, George Washington wrote that it "almost reduced my poor Wife to the lowest ebb of Misery."
- Martha later became paranoid after illnesses and was constantly afraid her family would die.
- When Martha Washington died 29 years later, on May 22, 1802, at the age of 71. She outlived her two husbands, all four of her children, and a beloved niece.
- The garnets were later inherited by Martha Custis Peter (Martha Washington's granddaughter), who was named after her dead aunt and also called Patsy.

Places for further Research:

Martha Washington

The Style of Martha Washington

## George Washington on Patsy's Death

# Patsy's Biography: Garnets

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Instructions: Interpret Martha Washington's garnets through the lens of the biography of Patsy Parke Custis.

## Key points

- Martha Parke Custis, nicknamed Patsy, was Martha Washington's daughter from her first marriage. Her father was Daniel Parke Custis, a wealthy landowner.
- Patsy was only three years old when her mother married George Washington. With no children of his own, he raised Patsy like his daughter.
- Patsy was a sickly child and by the time she was 11 or 12, she started having seizures. The Washingtons consulted many doctors, who prescribed many different treatments, such as medicine, bleeding, special diets, exercise, and wearing an iron ring.
- As she got older, Patsy's seizures became more frequent and more severe.
- Between 1759 and 1772, Martha and Patsy placed six orders for jewelry made with garnets.
- In the summer of 1770, George Washington kept a log of these episodes and in an eighty-six days period, Patsy had seizures on twenty-six days, often as many as two per day.
- Patsy died on June 19th, 1773 at 17 years old.
- The garnets were later inherited by Martha Custis Peter (Patsy's brother, John Parke Custis') who was named after her dead aunt and also called Patsy.

## Places for further Research:

Martha (Patsy) Parke Custis

George Washington on Patsy's Death

Doctor to Martha Washington on Patsy's treatment



# Sall's Biography: Garnets

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Instructions: Interpret Martha Washington's garnets through the lens of the biography of Sall.

## Key points

- Sall was a dower slave, meaning she was owned by Martha's first husband, Daniel Custis. After his death, his slaves passed to Martha. An inventory of Martha's slaves was made at that time, where Sall was 'valued' at £35. George Washington never owned those slaves and so they were not set free on his death. Any slaves living after Martha died (1802) would be split between the heirs of the Custis' estate, Martha's four grandchildren, including Martha (Patsy) Custis Peter.
- Sall would most likely have taken care of the garnets- bringing them to Martha and Patsy, helping put them on, and cleaning and storing them when they were not in use.
- In later years, when Sall wasn't assigned to the Mansion House, she picked cotton, spun yarn and knitted stockings for the other enslaved people at Mount Vernon. She also sold the Washingtons chickens, ducks, and geese.
- Sall had three children of her own and even traveled to Philadelphia in the summer of 1776, probably to help Martha, who was staying there and in New York City to spend time with George Washington during the American Revolution.
- Our last recorded mention of Sall was in June 1799, when she would have been around 55 years old.

Places for further Research:

Written Mentions of Sall

# Washington's Finances: Garnets

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Instructions: Interpret Martha Washington's garnets through the lens of the Washingtons' Finances.

## Key points

- Martha Custis was the wealthiest widow in Virginia when her first husband, Daniel Custis died in 1757. When she married George Washington in 1759, she brought with her a fortune and 84 enslaved people.
- Martha Washington had used the merchant house Robert Cary and Company to sell products abroad and use the money to buy English goods since her first marriage. After Martha married George, they continued to use the company to sell tobacco.
- George Washington eventually stopped farming tobacco because of the high taxes and great expense to transport it to England. Instead, he chose to diversify his crops and use a crop rotation method to renew the soil.
- On average, the Washingtons each spent between \$600 and \$800 (about £150-230<sup>1</sup>) a year on clothing. Martha Washington paid another \$200 (£50-57) per year to her hairdresser and spent about \$150 (£38-43) on new jewelry each year.
- There are 6 invoices/receipts that reference garnet jewelry
  - March 1759: Garnet necklace (42 shillings) and a Garnet Egret (18 shillings)
  - December 1760: A pair of 3 drop Garnet Earrings (6 pounds, 6 shillings)
  - February 13, 1764: A pair of Garnet Earrings (1 pound, 8 shillings), Garnet Hoop Ring (14 shillings), and a Garnet Necklace (2 pounds, 6 shillings)
  - December 12, 1766: Pair of Garnet Earrings (2 pounds)
  - August 10, 1770: Garnet Comb (unknown)
  - July 15, 1772: Paste and Garnet Pins for the hair (2 pounds)
- Garnets are actually a relatively inexpensive gem. They were also good quality for money as they could outshine more expensive gems like diamonds.
- Martha Washington chose jewelry that has well made but was not afraid to wear more middle priced materials, like paste stones instead of diamonds.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a calculation suggested by Mount Vernon's Historic Trades Department

Places for further Research:

Martha Washington

The Style of Martha Washington

Garnet Prices

Brouwer's "At the Plume of Feathers"