

# TAKE A SEAT: INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY AT MOUNT VERNON

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**LEVEL:**

Upper Elementary (Grades 3-5)

**TIMEFRAME:**

40 minutes

**OBJECTIVES:**

Students will define a simple design problem reflecting a need or a want

Students will generate and compare multiple possible solutions to a problem based on how well each is likely to meet the criteria and constraints of the problem.

Students will compare life in specific historical time periods to life today.

Students will describe how people's perspectives shaped the historical sources they created.

Students will infer the purpose of a historical source from information within the source itself.

**STANDARDS:**

- Revolution and the New Nation
- Application of Knowledge through higher-order thinking skills
- Primary Source Analysis
- Evaluate the relevancy and utility of a historical source based on information such as maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose

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**PROCEDURE:**

1. As a class, brainstorm a list of technology that you use in your classroom to make the learning experience easier.
  2. Look at Washington's study in the virtual tour (<https://virtualtour.mountvernon.org/>) by navigating to the *Mansion* tab and then the *Study* tab. Reflect on some pieces of technology in his study.
  3. Divide class into groups and provide each group with an image of an original chair at Mount Vernon from the *Primary Sources- Take a Seat* (included in PDF).
  4. Have each group analyze the chair using the questions on the *Worksheet- Take a Seat* (included in PDF).
  5. Ask each group to present the ways the chair they studied helped make life easier at Mount Vernon and during Washington's presidency. Come together as a class and discuss the ways technology help meet similar needs today.
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**OPTIONAL EXTENSION ACTIVITY:**

1. Martha Washington spent many hours in the back parlor sewing with her daughter and granddaughters. Ask students to combine the seating technology from Mount Vernon and the technology used today to invent a new chair that provides a comfortable spot for Martha Washington to work, while not taking up too much space.
2. Use recyclables to build the invention sketched at the end of the worksheet.

PRIMARY SOURCE

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Source A- Fan Chair



Description:

Washington's interest in science and mechanics can be seen through his purchasing of this chair. While in Philadelphia attending the Constitutional Convention in 1787, he purchased a fan chair. Its current whereabouts are unknown, but this version likely resembles the original. The chair was invented in 1786 for artist Charles Willson Peale by John Cram. The chair consisted of pedals below the sitter's feet that moved the fan above the chair. Peale hoped it would be "useful to the studious and others that are obliged to sit at their employments . . . to keep them cool. . . ." Washington installed his chair in his study, most likely for the secretaries who he employed to organize his military and plantation records.

Source B- "Uncommon" Chair



Description:

On April 17, 1790, Washington paid New York cabinetmaker Thomas Burling £7 for this "Uncommon Chair." It combines the sleek, contemporary design of a French barrel-back upholstered armchair with a unique swivel feature that allows the circular seat to rotate on four bone rollers. Washington must have found the chair to be comfortable, as he used it throughout his presidency and for the remainder of his life. Following his return to Mount Vernon in March 1797, he placed it in his study next to his desk. It is made of mahogany, mahogany veneer, white oak, iron, metal, bone, leather and brass.

Source C- Settee Bedstead



Above: Settee Bedstead, closed



Above: Settee Bedstead, open

Description:

Don't let this leather-covered couch fool you! What appears to be a solid piece of furniture is in fact an eighteenth-century sofa bed. A bed frame pulls out from the interior of the bottom part of the settee, and the seat back lifts up to form a canopy fitted with curtains that surrounded the sleeper's head at night. George Washington purchased "1 Settee bed and furniture £13" in 1774 and it was undoubtedly used it as an extra guest bed to accommodate Mount Vernon's many visitors. This is not the exact settee bedstead owned by Washington, but is similar to the one that stood in the Little Parlor.

WORKSHEET: TAKE A SEAT:  
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MOUNT VERNON

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

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Use the provided Mount Vernon location and primary source to answer the following questions. When using the virtual tour online to look at location, additional interpretation is provided in hotspots about each location from Mount Vernon's staff.

1. What chair did you analyze?
2. Describe this chair for a friend. How big is it? What does it look like? Does it move in any way? Does it make noise?
3. How do you think this chair helped make life easier for people during George Washington's lifetime?
4. Do we use any similar technology today? What activities can we make easier with that technology?

5. Sketch a design of an invention that could make sitting easier today. Feel free to use elements of the historic technology seen at Mount Vernon or modern technology to add to your invention.