LESSON PLAN

COVERTURE, COLONIAL FAMILY ETHIC, AND WIDOWHOOD

LEVEL:
High School

TIMEFRAME:
Approximately 30 minutes

OBJECTIVES:
Students will examine 18th-century primary source documents to analyze coverture and widowhood through Martha Washington’s own words.

Student will analyze the ways in which Martha Washington both fits, and is the exception, to the social norms of coverture, widowhood, and colonial family ethic.

STANDARDS:
· Colonial America
· Civic Values and Social Norms
· Revolution and the New Nation
· Analysis of Primary Sources
· Evaluating Sources
· Reading For Perspective
· Integrating Evidence from Multiple Relevant Historical Sources into a Reasoned Argument About the Past

PROCEDURE:
1. Provide students with the Background Information handout (included in PDF) for definitions of “colonial family ethic” and “coverture” as well as information on Martha Washington.
2. Distribute the Primary Source Set handout for students to read (included in PDF).
3. Ask students to analyze the primary sources using the Primary Source Set Short Answer worksheet (included in PDF) to help build historical interpretations and document analysis skills.
4. Instruct students to answer one of the Primary Source Set Essay worksheet (included in PDF) for each primary source listed.
Colonial Family Ethic was the organization of families and marriage during the colonial period. It was a stable system and had common elements throughout the various geographic regions of Britain’s North American colonies. The four basic principles of Colonial Family Ethic are marriage, complementary roles for helpmeets (spouses), child bearing and child rearing, and literacy. Unmarried women had a few options. Literate women could become governesses or teach school. Women skilled at cloth making could produce textiles. Unskilled women could work as maids or domestics. Remarriage after the death of a spouse was encouraged as too many unmarried women was seen as destabilizing to a town.

Coverture was a system of laws that defined a women’s position in society as subordinate to that of men. Once she became a wife, a woman was seen as being one and the same as her husband. A married woman was connected to her husband’s identity and did not have her own political citizenship. Women were acknowledged as mothers and wives, but only under the governance of men. Married women, under coverture, could not own property or control finances; nor she have rights to her own body. Widows whose husbands died without a will, which was known as intestate, were entitled to a dower share of their husband’s estate. The dower was the use of one-third of the husband’s estate for the widow’s lifetime. This “the widow’s third” was under the control of the widow until she remarried, at which time her new husband would take over control. The rest of the estate would be placed into a trust for any children of the marriage. When a husband died with a last will and testament written he often included the name of a trustee to control his estate property.

Background Information: Martha Washington

In 1750, the eighteen-year-old Martha Dandridge married Daniel Parke Custis, who was twenty years her senior. Though Martha grew up as a member of the lower gentry her marriage into the wealthier Custis family made her part of the upper gentry. The Custis family owned hundreds of enslaved people and thousands of acres of plantations and land. Martha and Daniel Parke Custis had four children; however, only John (Jacky) Parke Custis and Martha (Patsy) Parke Custis survived infancy. After only seven years of marriage, Daniel died intestate in 1757. Martha became the wealthiest widow in Virginia and took control of roughly 17,500 acres of land and nearly 300 enslaved people, and oversaw the business of selling tobacco to England and ordering goods for the family. As a widow whose husband died intestate, she was free from the bonds of coverture and could act as the head of household in ways that married women could not.
The expectations of the Colonial Family Ethic were that most widows and widowers under the age of forty would remarry. Martha Dandridge Custis had several suitors from which to choose. Her pick was Colonel George Washington. When she married Colonel Washington on January 6, 1759, he took over management of the Custis estate for both Martha and her two children. Martha and George Washington moved to his home Mount Vernon, to raise their family. Unfortunately, George and Martha never had children of their own; however, they did raise Jacky and Patsy together. Patsy died of epilepsy in 1773 and Jacky died in 1781 after the Battle of Yorktown during the American Revolution. After Jacky’s death, the Washingtons raised his two youngest children as their own, Eleanor “Nelly” Parke Custis and George Washington “Washy” Parke Custis. Martha was also particularly close to her niece Frances “Fanny” Bassett. Fanny married George Washington’s nephew George Augustine Washington in 1785. After his death in 1793, she married Washington’s personal secretary Tobias Lear.

Martha and George Washington were married for over forty years at the time of Washington’s death in 1799. Because of her age, wealth, and status as former First Lady, there was no expectation that Martha Washington would remarry. Following instructions in his will, George Washington was buried at Mount Vernon. Soon after Washington’s funeral, President John Adams wrote to Martha Washington expressing the desire of Congress to inter Washington’s body in a vault built under the Capitol. Despite her immense grief, Martha reluctantly agreed, while asking that her own body be placed there beside her late husband’s. Neither of the Washingtons’ bodies was moved to the Capitol and they remain together in the New Tomb at Mount Vernon.
SOURCE A - MARTHA CUSTIS TO ROBERT CARY AND COMPANY, AUGUST 20, 1757

Virginia Aug 20, 1757

Gentlemen

I imagine before this you will hear of the great misfortune I have met with in the Colony my late Husband Mr. Custis your Correspondent, by which all his Affairs fall under my management, I believe to both your satisfaction correspondence with you and I now having admon of his Estate I hope I shall continue the Correspondene and that it will be lasting and agreeable to us both. I shall yearly ship a considerable part of the Tobacco I make to you which I shall take care to have made as good as possible and hope you will do your endeavor to get me a good Price, Yours by Capt. Coxen of the 10th of March & by John Hanbury Captn Talman of the 17 & 21st & the Goods you sent came safe to Mr. Custis’s hands before his Death.

I wrote you sometime ago insurance on 34 Hhds of Tobo which I informed you would come in Capt. Coxen which I hope you have put 2 more Hhds on board which I have not insured, the whole Shipped to you by him is now 36 Hhds which I have inclosed a Bill of Lading for, I have reason to believe they are as good as they can well be and hope you will get me a Price suitable to them. I shall want some Goods this Year for me Family which I have inclosed an Invoice of and hope you will take care they are well bot and sent me by your first Ship to this river. . . . As soon as you have sold all of the Toba. Shipped to you by Mr. Custis last year, please to make out an Account Current and send it to me by the first Opportunity. As Mr. Custis died Without Will and left but two Children his Estate will be kept together some time and I will it will be proper to continue this Account with you in the same manner as if he was living, as most of the goods I shall send for will be for the use of the Family, I am Gentlemen Your most hble Servt.

Martha Custis

To Robert Cary Esq. & Co.

Merchts in London
SOURCE B - MARTHA WASHINGTON TO FRANCES “FANNY” BASSETT, SEPTEMBER 29, 1794

1 My dear Fanny, I wish I could give you unerring advise in regard to the request contained in your
2 last letter; I really dont know what to say to you on the subject; you must be governed by your
3 own judgement, and I trust providence will derect you for the best; it is a matter more interesting
4 to yourself than any other[.] The person contemplated is a worthy man, esteemed by every one
5 that is aquainted with him; he has, it is concieved, fair prospects before him;–is, I belive, very
6 industri[ous] and will, I have not a doubt, make sumthing handsome for himself.–as to the
7 President, he never has, nor never will, as you have often heard him say, inter meddle in
8 matrimonial concerns. he joins with me however in wishing you every happyness this world can
9 give.–you have had a long acquaintance with Mr Lear, and must know him as well as I do.–he
10 always appeared very attentive to his wife and child, as farr as ever I have seen; he is I believe, a
11 man of strict honor and probity; and one with whom you would have as good a prospect of
12 happyness as with any one I know; but beg you will not let anything I say influence you either
13 way. The President has a very high opinion of and friendship for Mr. Lear; and has not the least
14 objection to your forming the connection but, no more than myself, would wish to influence your
15 judgement, either way–yours and the childrens good being among the first wishes of my heart.
Mount Vernon December 31st, 1799

Sir,

While I feel, with the keenest anguish, the late dispensation of Divine Providence, I cannot be insensible to the respectful mournful and respectful tributes of respect & veneration, which are paid to the memory of my dear deceased Husband. - And as his best services and anxious wishes were always devoted to the welfare and happiness of his Country; it affords me the highest service of consolation no inconsiderable consolation.

Taught by the great Example, which I have So long had before me, never to oppose my private wishes to the Public Will, I must consent to the request made by Congress, which you have had the goodness to transmit to me.

And in doing this, I need not Say what a sacrifice of individual feeling, I make to a Sense of public Duty.

With grateful unfeigned thanks for grateful acknowledgements & unfeigned thanks for the personal respect & evidences of condolence expressed by Con- gress and yourself – and with unfeigned thanks for your ex- pression of Condolence I remain, very respectfully,
23 Sir
24 your most ob.d most Hble Serv
25 The Presint of the U.S.
26 M. Washington
Answer the following questions using evidence from the primary source documents.

SOURCE A - MARTHA WASHINGTON TO ROBERT CARY AND COMPANY, AUGUST 20, 1757 (MARTHA CUSTIS, AGE 26)

1. What was Martha Custis’ goal in writing to Robert Cary and Company? What she she want as the outcome of this letter?

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

2. What was the previous relationship between Daniel Parke Custis and Robert Cary?

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

3. Why would Martha Custis mention that her husband died without a will?

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
SOURCE B - MARTHA WASHINGTON TO FANCES “FANNY” BASSETT, SEPTEMBER 29, 1794
(MARTHA WASHINGTON, AGE 63)

1. What was Martha Washington’s opinion of Tobias Lear?
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

2. What was Martha’s ultimate advice to Fanny regarding the marriage proposal?
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

3. Why would Fanny write to Martha Washington for advice on remarrying?
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
SOURCE C - TOBIAS LEAR ON BEHALF OF MARTHA WASHINGTON TO PRESIDENT JOHN ADAMS, DECEMBER 31, 1799 (MARTHA WASHINGTON, AGE 68)

1. What reasoning does Martha Washington give for consenting to Congress on moving George Washington’s body?

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

2. What can you infer about this letter from the stricken words?

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

3. What can you infer from Tobias Lear’s help in framing the letter?

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
Write a short essay addressing one of the prompts below. Be sure to support all claims using evidence from the primary source set.

1. To what extent did Martha Washington conform to and represent the expectations of coverture and Colonial Family Ethic? To what extent did she represent an exception?

2. Compare and contrast the widowhood of Martha Custis and Martha Washington.

3. Which widowhood afforded Martha Washington more privacy?