

George Washington: Slave Holder and Abolitionist?



LIFE OF GEORGE WASHINGTON
THE MUSEUM

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Shaw Middle School

Extended Controversial Unit Lesson Plan

Extended Controversial Issue Discussion Lesson Plan

Lesson Title: George Washington: Slave holder and abolitionist?

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Appropriate for Grade Level(s): 7-8

US History Standard(s)/Applicable CCSS(s):

1. CCSS: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources
 2. CCSS: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.
- H2.18 Describe the institutionalization of slavery in America, the resistance of the enslaved, and the ongoing struggle between proponents and opponents of slavery.**

Discussion Question(s): Was George Washington a man of his time, a slaveholder in a state where 40% of the population

Were slaves? Was George Washington a conflicted abolitionist, searching for a solution to the slavery dilemma?

Engagement Strategy: Socratic Seminar

Student Readings (list):

1. Hook video giving overview of slave life at Mount Vernon:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnCRsK6msww> start clip at 4:11 End clip at 9:52
2. Excerpts from An Imperfect God George Washington His Slaves and the Creation of America
3. Readings/Excerpts from the Virginia Papers on Mount Vernon Website
<http://www.mountvernon.org/educational-resources/encyclopedia/george-washington-and-slavery>
4. Video Clip: George Washington: Slave Owner and Abolitionist Parts 1-3
Part 1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAU-0IGiPq4>
Part 2 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvvH_v8riZQ
Part 3 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxzX9pJw5e4>
5. Excerpts from a speech, ""The Only Unavoidable Subject of Regret "George Washington and Slavery from historian Peter R. Henriques

Total Time Needed**Lesson Outline:**

Time Frame (e.g. 15 minutes)	What is the teacher doing?	What are students doing?
20 minutes	Pass out Word Splash for the video hook. Watch video clip: The Story of Oney Judge and the Real George Washington. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnCRsK6msww _ Start 4:11 end 9:52 Discuss video clip with students.	Prior to video predict what the words may mean. After the video, write sentences with what the words do mean.
20 minutes	Read/discuss background essay.	Annotating
3 50 minute classes	Read/discuss documents, answer questions	Annotate, answer questions
80 minutes	Direct students to outline essay/take position on issue	Students take position, outline essay.
50 minutes	Observe, assist as necessary.	Students write essay from outline
15 minutes	Go over directions for discussion. Students follow rules of Accountable Talk. Have students form large group for discussion. Teacher goes over rubric for grading. Give student 2 pennies or markers for students to use for a reminder to speak at least 2 times.	Students listen to directions. Review documents as necessary to be prepared for discussion.
30 minutes	Observe, tally students participation.	Students discuss question, "Was George Washington a man of his times, a slave holder, or a conflicted abolitionist?"
20 minutes	Discuss and Reflect with students results of discussion.	Students discuss results of discussion, fill out discussion reflection.

Word Splash Hook

Before watching the video, predict what these words will be about. After watching the video, write a sentence about how each of the words fits into the video clip.

Will

shells

Underground Hallway

Runaway Slave

George Washington Slave Holder and Abolitionist?

Background Essay

George Washington was born, reared, and lived in Virginia, a place where fully 40% of the population were slaves for life, and where slavery was an intricate and crucial aspect of the plantation economy and social system. Virginia was a hierarchical society where it was widely accepted that some men were born and reared to rule and others to be ruled. Slavery was an intricate part of George Washington's entire life. Washington, like other Virginia planters, continued to live with slavery - and off of slavery. He became a slave owner at the age of 11 when he inherited about 10 or 11 slaves as a result of his father's untimely death in 1743. During the remainder of his life, he owned increasingly larger numbers of slaves, and by the time of his own death in 1799 there were approximately 316 slaves at Mount Vernon. About half of these slaves were not actually his slaves, but were dower slaves belonging to the Custis estate. George Washington, like other men of his time, was deeply influenced by the slave culture in which he was reared. Blacks were virtually universally viewed as degraded human beings. Approximately 99% of the blacks living in Virginia prior to the American Revolution were slaves.

While President, Washington signed the Northwest Territory Act which banned slaves in the Northwest Territory. Additionally, Washington signed the Naturalization Act which gave citizenship to free white people. Another important Act Washington signed was the Fugitive Slave Act. This Act gave slave owners the right to capture escaped slaves in any state. While living in Philadelphia as President, Washington brought his own slaves to Philadelphia even though Philadelphia had banned slavery. Was Washington a man of his time, a slaveholder trying to avoid conflict in the newly formed country or a conflicted abolitionist?

Document A

Washington's views on slavery

An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America Henry Wiencek page 28.

1 Curtis slaves married Washington slaves, creating families that crossed the columns in Washington's
2 ledgers. These intermarriages caused Washington enormous anxiety at the end of his life, as he faced
3 the prospect of freeing part of a family while leaving the part enslaved, unless he could persuade the
4 Curtis heirs of the justice of emancipation.

5

6 His views on slavery were radically altered during the Revolutionary War. Within three years of the start
7 of the war, Washington, who was then forty-six years old and had been a slave owner for thirty-five
8 years, confided to a cousin that he longed "every day...more and more to get clear" of the ownership of
9 slaves.

Questions

1. What does Washington mean by the quote, "creating families that crossed the columns in Washington's ledgers?"
2. Why would the intermarriages cause Washington anxiety?
3. In lines 7-8, Washington was a slave owner for 35 years, yet he tells a cousin, "he longed, "every day...more and more to get clear" of the ownership of slaves. Why might he feel this way?

Document B

1 *"The Only Unavoidable Subject of Regret": George Washington and Slavery* by Peter R. Henriques, 2001

2

3 While Washington never referred to his slaves as his children, he did refer to them as part of his
4 family. [And virtually never as slaves - they were usually my servants or my Negroes or my
5 people or my black labourers] Washington recognized that slaves experienced the same range of
6 emotions as the unenslaved and attempted to make accommodations where possible. Whatever
7 their legal status as human chattel, Washington knew they were human beings. He recognized
8 the validity of slave marriages and became increasingly concerned for slave families and their
9 personal relationships and in his dislike of splitting up slaves who had established such personal
10 and familial ties. [In his words, "To disperse families I have an utter aversion." Or again, "It is
11 against my inclination... to hurt the feelings of those unhappy people by a separation of man and
12 wife, or of families."] In short, Washington realized a paternalistic relationship involved mutual
13 obligations.

Questions

1. How does Washington refer to his slaves? Why do you believe he may refer to them in this manner?
2. What is "human chattel" in line 7?
3. What were Washington's feelings regarding slave families. Use evidence from the document.
4. How did Washington feel about splitting up slave families?

Document C

Quotes from Washington on Ending Slavery

The Only Unavoidable Subject of Regret" George Washington and Slavery by Peter R. Henriques, 2001

I wish from my soul that the legislature of this state could see the policy of a gradual abolition of slavery. It would prevent much mischief."

"... No man desires more heartily than I do [the end of slavery]. Not only do I pray for it on the score of human dignity, but I can clearly foresee that nothing but the rooting out of slavery can perpetuate the existence of our union."

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

Questions

1. In the first quote, who might George Washington be addressing? What does he want to see done?
2. What do you think Washington meant when he said in line 9, "I can clearly foresee that nothing but the rooting out of slavery can perpetuate the existence of our nation?"
3. What does the statement in line 12-13 mean that says, "To make the adults among them as easy & comfortable in their circumstances as their actual state of ignorance and improvidence would admit?"
4. Summarize the message of these quotes in 1 sentence.

Document D

Washington on the Punishment of Slaves

1

2 An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America Henry Wiencek p. 111,
3 112

4 "In his struggle to control his slaves Washington had to resort to violence. He regarded physical
5 punishment as a necessity. But he also knew it was necessary to restrain his overseers in wielding the
6 whip. The overseers were supposed to petition him if a slave needed punishing. It was supposed to be
7 written down why...It's easy to say the overseers whipped the slaves. But if Washington gave
8 permission, he might as well have wielded the lash."

9

10 "Tranquility had to be ensured with punishment. There was no other way at Mount Vernon.
11 Washington took care of most offences by slaves on the plantation with a whipping, carried out not by
12 him but by the overseers."

13 ...GW justified the occasional severity. In his words, "if the Negroes will not do their duty by fair means,
14 they must be compelled to do it." Or again, "must have by fair means or by coercion (the first is vastly
15 more agreeable to me) When confronted by a particularly recalcitrant bondsman he simply directed his
16 manager to "give him a good whippin". Occasionally, female slaves felt the whip as well. He wrote his
17 manager, "Your treatment of Charlotte was very proper, and if She, or any other of the Servants will not
18 do their duty by fair means, or are impertinent, correction (as the only alternative) must be
19 administered."

Questions

1. Why did Washington believe it was necessary to restrain his overseers in wielding the whip?
2. Explain what you think would have been meant by the phrase, "tranquility had to be ensured with punishment."
3. According to Washington, what reasons would justify the use of physical punishment?

1 **Document E**

2 **From George Washington's Last Will**
3 **Mt. Vernon, 9 July 1799**

4 *The Papers of George Washington, Retirement Series, vol. 4, April - December 1799.* (Charlottesville:
5 University Press of Virginia, 1999), 477-492.

6

7 Upon the decease of my wife, it is my Will & desire that all the Slaves which I hold in my own right, shall
8 receive their freedom.... And whereas among those who will receive freedom according to this devise,
9 there may be some, who from old age or bodily infirmities, and others who on account of their infancy,
10 that will be unable to support themselves; it is my Will and desire that all who come under the first &
11 second description shall be comfortably cloathed & fed by my heirs while they live;... The Negros thus
12 bound, are (by their Masters or Mistresses) to be taught to read & write; and to be brought up to some
13 useful occupation, agreeably to the Laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia, providing for the support of
14 Orphan and other poor Children. I do hereby expressly forbid the Sale, or transportation out of the said
15 Commonwealth, of any Slave I may die possessed of, under any pretense whatsoever.... And to my
16 Mulatto man William (calling himself William Lee) I give immediate freedom; or if he should prefer it (on
17 account of the accidents which have befallen him, and which have rendered him incapable of walking or
18 of any active employment) to remain in the situation he now is, it shall be optional in him to do so: In
19 either case however, I allow him an annuity of thirty dollars during his natural life, which shall be
20 independent of the victuals and cloaths he has been accustomed to receive, if he chuses the last
21 alternative; but in full, with his freedom, if he prefers the first; & this I give him as a testimony of my
22 sense of his attachment to me, and for his faithful services during the Revolutionary War.

Questions

1. When did Washington free his slaves? Why do you think he put in his Will to free them at that time and not upon his death?
2. What would happen according to the Will if you were old, ill or too young to support yourself?
3. What did he want to happen to the slaves once free? (Lines 11-12)
4. What would happen to William?

Document F

Slave treatment

1 An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America Henry Wiencek

2 Washington's own records indicate that the slaves were miserably clothed. A set of clothing was doled
3 out just once a year, supplemented by a woolen jacket in the winter.

4 He was also very sparing of blankets. Mothers received a blanket with each newborn, but in the normal
5 course of events people had to wait years to get a fresh blanket. These items, too, were reduced to
6 filthy, insect-ridden rags because Washington ordered the slaves to use their blankets not only for
7 sleeping, but to haul leaves to line the beds of the livestock.

8 One visitor to Mount Vernon [a Polish nobleman] was shocked by the living quarters of Washington's
9 slaves referring to them as "huts," adding "for one can not call them by the name of houses. They are
10 more miserable than the most miserable of the cottages of our peasants. The husband and wife sleep on
11 a mean pallet, the children on the ground; a very bad fireplace, some utensils for cooking.

12 Some of his famous false teeth, celebrated in textbook lore, were yanked from the heads of his slaves
13 and fitted into his dentures. Moreover, Washington apparently had slaves' teeth transplanted into his
14 own jaw in 1784.

Questions

1. How often did a slave get a set of clothes?
2. What might a blanket be like at Mount Vernon?
3. What were the slave quarters compared to?
4. What would a slave quarters look like at Mount Vernon?
5. How did Washington get the teeth for his false teeth?

Document G

Slave Rebellion at Mount Vernon

1 *"The Only Unavoidable Subject of Regret": George Washington and Slavery* by Peter R. Henriques, 2001

2 Every place where I have been there are many workmen, and little work." He had lots of complaints.
3 Slaves feigned illness, destroyed equipment, were often idle and regularly stole his corn, meat, apples,
4 and liquor. GW lamented that unless watched the slaves would get 2 glasses of wine for every one
5 served in the mansion. Everything not nailed down was in danger of being stolen. And how could it be
6 nailed down when even the nails were disappearing?

7

8 GW tried hard to thwart the robberies. Overseers were to visit slave quarters at unexpected times, lie in
9 wait along the roads to catch anyone making off with goods from the plantation, and turn in broken and
10 worn tools and utensils before receiving replacements. Nails were to be rationed, and comparison made
11 between the number issued to carpenters and the number actually hammered into beams and planks.
12 All of the sheep from the 5 plantations were to be brought together into one herd and watched
13 constantly. They were to be sheared before they were washed. "Otherwise," he worried, "I shall have a
14 larger part of the Wool stolen if washed after it is sheared." At one point GW even ordered that most of
15 the dogs belonging to slaves at MV be shot because they served as sentinels for night raids on plantation
16 stores. He further ordered, "if any Negro [still] presumes under any pretense whatsoever, to preserve,
17 or bring one into the family. . . he shall be severely punished, and the dog hanged."

Questions

1. In lines 3-4 what were slaves doing at Mount Vernon that Washington complained about?
2. In what ways did Washington try to stop the robberies at Mount Vernon?
3. Why did Washington order that the dogs needed to be shot?

Document H

GW Video Clips

Video Clip: George Washington: Slave Owner and Abolitionist Parts 1-3

Part 1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAU-0IGiPq4>

Part 2 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvvH_v8riZQ

Part 3 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxzX9pJw5e4>

1. What “higher good” did Washington want to establish from Clip #1?

In the chart below identify key evidence that supports that side.

Key Points of Video Clips

GW as Abolitionist	GW as Slave Holder

George Washington Abolitionist Example Essay

1
2
3 Was George Washington an abolitionist who was searching for a way to end slavery
4 while having over 300 slaves himself? George Washington lived in a state where 40%
5 of the population was slaves for life. George Washington himself became a slave
6 owner at the age of 11 years old. George Washington owned a large plantation
7 consisting of several farms called Mount Vernon where there was a large need for labor.
8 About 99% of the blacks in Virginia in the late 1700's were slaves. Slaves lived in a
9 world where they were treated as degraded humans who were considered property and
10 therefore did not have any rights. The United States was a new nation struggling with
11 the growing division over the issue of slavery. George Washington was a conflicted
12 abolitionist searching for a solution to the slavery problem in America.

13 Washington saw slaves more as humans than just as slaves with emotions, needs
14 and desires. "Washington referred to his slaves as part of his family." He recognized
15 the validity of slave marriages and their personal relationships and became concerned
16 with splitting up any relationships. The intermarriages that happened between the
17 Washington slaves and the Custis slaves "caused Washington enormous anxiety at the
18 end of his life, as he faced the prospect of freeing part of a family while leaving the part
19 enslaved, unless he could persuade the Curtis heirs of the justice of emancipation."
20 Washington regretted the unfortunate condition of slavery. "No man desires more
21 heartily than I do [the end of slavery]. Not only do I pray for it on the score of human
22 dignity, but I can clearly foresee that nothing but the rooting out of slavery can

1 Perpetuate the existence of our union.” In Washington's last will he set free the slaves
2 that belonged to him. Washington also provided a pension for many of the slaves upon
3 his release.

4 Washington was a slave owner who became wealthy and powerful on the backs of
5 slaves. Conversely, Washington, in fact wanted an end to slavery. Washington was a
6 conflicted man who wanted to solve the dilemma of slavery in America. As a new
7 nation was developing, Washington knew that this was a point which was dividing this
8 newly formed nation. He had often referred to these slaves as his own family and
9 wished a solution to this dilemma that plagued the nation. Washington was a conflicted
10 slave-owner who struggled with a solution to solving the problem of slavery in America.

11 Washington did want to see an end to slavery. He made several attempts to
12 abolish slavery. He often expressed his wished to abolish slavery. However, he knew
13 the importance of establishing a new nation. Furthermore, he knew the role slavery
14 played in the economy of the nation and how it also divided the nation. He knew while
15 he was President his most important role was getting the nation established. In
16 summary, it's evident that Washington struggled with being a man of his time, a slave
17 holder surrounded by the institute of slavery, and a man who wanted to see an end of
18 the institution that caused him turmoil through the end of his life.

19

DBQ Outline for Argumentative Essay

Name _____ Date _____ Period _____

Paragraph #1

Document Based

Question _____

Grabber/Hook _____

Background (3-4 sentences)

Super

Claim _____

Paragraph #2

Baby

Claim _____

Evidence _____

Reasoning _____

Evidence _____

Reasoning _____

Evidence _____

Reasoning _____

Baby

Conclusion _____

Paragraph #3

Counterclaim(the other point of view)

Evidence(for your side)

Reasoning

Evidence(for your side)

Reasoning

Evidence (for your side)

Reasoning

Baby

conclusion _____

Paragraph #4

First,

Second,

Third

Discussion Rubric

	4	3	2	1	0
Preparation	All reading is completed prior to discussion. All work was completed prior to discussion with a great deal of thought and effort.	All reading is complete prior to discussion. Student has completed all assigned work prior to discussion.	All reading is completed. Student has completed most of the assigned work prior to discussion.	Some reading may have been completed prior to discussion. Student may have completed some of the work prior to discussion.	Reading was not completed. Work was not completed.
Participation	Student contributes at least 2 times to the discussion in a thoughtful way. You allow others to contribute too.	Student contributes 2 times to discussion or you contribute in a way not allowing others to contribute.	Student contributes 1 time to the discussion, it is thoughtful contribution.	Student contributes 1 time to discussion, but contribution is not thoughtful.	Student does not contribute to discussion.
Evidence	Student uses at least 2 sources of evidence that tie directly to their claim.	Student uses 2 sources of evidence, but may not tie directly to their claim.	Student uses 1 source of evidence that ties directly to their claim.	Student uses 1 source of evidence that does not tie to their claim.	Student presents no evidence.
Reasoning X2	Student supports evidence with reasoning that is well thought out several times in the discussion. You respond to other responses very well. It is evident they use information from their readings as well as their own analysis.	Student supports evidence with reasoning a few times during the discussion. You may respond to another member of the group.	Student supports evidence with reasoning once during the discussion. Student may or may not respond to another member of the group.	Student supports evidence with very vague reasoning. Your reasoning does not tie to evidence or other ideas presented.	Student does not give any reasoning.
Respect/ Manners	Student always listens while others are speaking and looks at them. Student provides feedback and asks follow-up questions appropriately. Student uses accountable talk, and is courteous and polite at all times.	Student listens while others are speaking. Student provides feedback and asks follow-up questions. Student may use accountable talk and is always courteous and polite.	Student may be listening while others are talking. Student may provide feedback and follow-up questions. Student is courteous most of the time.	Student may be off task for part of the discussion. Student may say inappropriate remarks or may not be courteous to others.	Student is off-task for the discussion. They may several inappropriate or rude comments.

Discussion Reflection

Which side did you choose to argue?

What do you think was the most important evidence for your side?

What do you think was the most important evidence for the counter claim?

Summarize your beliefs in 3 sentences after the discussion:

What are 2 of the most important benefits you got from the discussion.