

George Washington and the American Revolution

Mount Vernon

June 27 – July 23, 2010

Lesson Title: Washington's Big Decision

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Lesson Topic:	George Washington, as a farmer in colonial Virginia, decided in 1765 to shift the focus of his agricultural pursuits from tobacco to wheat. This lesson will allow students to examine the advantages and disadvantages of growing wheat compared to tobacco. This decision by Washington was historically significant because he was one of the first in Virginia to make the move to cereal grains and allow large landowners to earn more profit and get out from under growing debt caused by the dependency on tobacco.
Standards lesson will address:	Missouri State Social Studies Standards : In Social Studies, students in Missouri public schools will acquire a solid foundation which includes knowledge of : 4. economic concepts (including productivity and the market system) and principles (including the laws of supply and demand), and 7. the use of tools of social science inquiry (such as surveys, statistics, maps, documents).
Student Expectations:	Students will understand the rationale behind the decision George Washington made in 1765 to focus on wheat instead of tobacco on his Mount Vernon farms.
Essential Question:	Why did George Washington decide to focus on wheat as the primary crop on his Mount Vernon farms beginning in 1765 instead of tobacco?
Primary Source Documents:	Map of George Washington's farms – dated December 12, 1793 – from Library of Congress : http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trr109.html

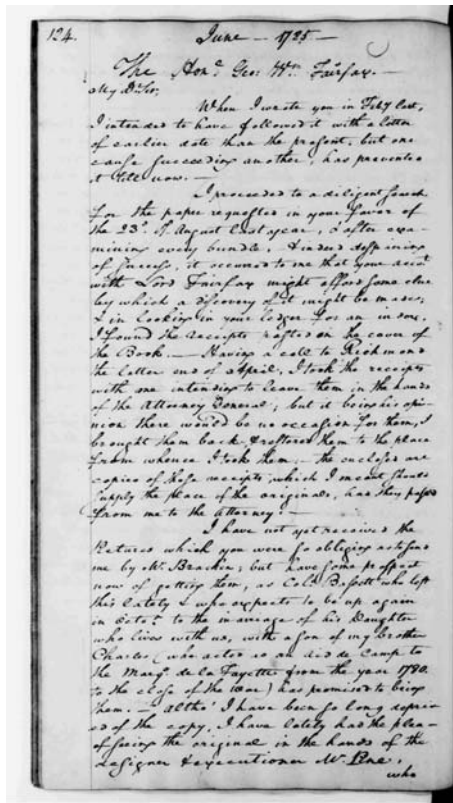
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George Washington's Letter to George William Fairfax about finding a farm manager to help with new techniques, June 30, 1785 – from Library of Congress : <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mgw2&fileName=gwpage012.db&recNum=125>



Motivation:

Students will be divided into small groups, be given a copy of a map of George Washington's farms and be asked to guess the primary crop Washington grew on his Mount Vernon farms. (There is more than one correct answer of course which will lead us into the discuss of the advantages and disadvantages of wheat and tobacco.)

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Lesson:

1. Students are told that today we will be discussing George Washington as a farmer.
2. Students are organized into small groups of no more than three students.
3. Each group will be given a copy of a map drawn by George Washington in 1793 of his farms at Mount Vernon.
4. Students are instructed to examine the map for a couple of minutes and decide as a group what crop they believe Washington grew on his farms.
5. Each group is asked which crop they believe was Washington's primary crop and the teacher writes it down for the class to see. The teacher should also ask each group why they came to their answer.
6. The teacher will share with the class that there are two correct answers. Between 1757 and 1764 tobacco was the primary crop Washington grew. Beginning in 1765 and until his death in 1799, Washington grew primarily wheat on his farms.
7. Ask students to consider why Washington would make this change and give each group a minute or two to discuss their answer before sharing it with the class.
8. The teacher will now hand out the "Washington's Big Decision" worksheet which will help guide them through the class discussion of why Washington made this pivotal decision. Two copies of this handout are provided with this lesson plan: a blank copy for the students to complete and a completed version to help guide the teacher in discussion.

Washington's Big Decision – Tobacco or Wheat?

	Tobacco	Wheat
Labor		
Impact on Soil		
Uses for Product		
Markets		

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Washington's Big Decision – Tobacco or Wheat?

	Tobacco	Wheat
Labor	Requires much labor, 18 month process, creates addition need for slaves in the fields, more expensive in terms of labor	Does not require as much labor as tobacco, lowers demand for slaves, less expensive in terms of labor, shorter growing season
Impact on Soil	Burns out the soil, after repeated years of planting the soil is depleted, soil in this part of Virginia is not as suited to tobacco	Less taxing on the soil than tobacco, can be used in crop rotation to save soil
Uses for Product	This tobacco was large leaf tobacco used in making cigars	Wheat can be made into flour for humans, waste material can be fed to animals, wheat also used of the distillery to produce alcohol
Markets	Only sold to buyers in England, limited market	Very marketable to different places in the world, Washington even sold it to buyers in Europe, West Indies and Portugal

9. The teacher will guide students through a comparison of major factors Washington had to consider to make this decision: amount of labor needed, the impact on the soil, the market for the crop and the uses for the crop. The teacher can ask each group for their thoughts on the advantages of disadvantages of growing wheat and tobacco. The teacher will use the completed version of the graphic organizer to guide the discussion as students will write the correct information on their individual copy of the worksheet.
10. The teacher can explain that the decision Washington faced was one he shared with other Virginia farmers. Many large Virginia land owners were eventually deeply in debt from deeply in debt after years of raising tobacco. Washington's decision to transfer his focus from tobacco to wheat helped him become financially stable and he demonstrated a successful manner in which to grow a crop other than tobacco.

Summary:

George Washington made so many important decisions as our first president and the commander of the Continental army in the Revolutionary War, it is easy to forget that he was also a very successful Virginia farmer. One of the reasons he was successful is his ability to be innovative and think outside of the box. Washington's decision in 1765 to shift his agricultural focus is one example of his vision and ability to adapt to be successful.