

“Primarily George”

Note: The Education Department recently took part in a program in which participants from host institution Mount Vernon, the National Archives, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, the Papers of George Washington and the Massachusetts Historical Society were asked to select key documents from their respective collections which could be effectively used by teachers as primary source teaching tools. The documents had to relate to George Washington and each institution selected one document for each of three grade levels: fifth, eighth and eleventh. The following are the links to the documents from our collections with associated historical and educational resource materials developed by MHS staff.

From the collections of the nation’s oldest Historical Society (1791) on the nation’s First President...

FOR FIFTH GRADE:

A Letter from John Adams in Philadelphia to Abigail Adams (11-17 June 1775)

Background:

This letter, written by future President John Adams to his wife Abigail in June of 1775, is one of over 1100 exchanged by the couple when their duties force them to live apart:

<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/letter/>

John is serving in the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, while Abigail manages family and farm in Braintree, just south of Boston. On June 17, just two months after the beginning of the American Revolution, John Adams describes to his “dearest friend” the appointment of George Washington as commander of the Continental Army. Washington will take charge of the American troops camped in Cambridge, just across the river from where the British army occupies Boston. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17750611ja>

Framing Questions:

Notice the words Adams chooses to describe Washington's character. What do those words tell you about Washington? What do they tell you about Adams? What qualities does Adams admire in the new General?

Why does Adams use the word "cementing"? What needs to be cemented and why? Why is Washington the man for the job?

How does Adams want the people of Massachusetts to act toward Washington? Why might he be worried about Washington's welcome in this colony?

Further Investigation:

Read the paragraph in which Adams describes the Continental Congress. According to him, why did the delegates from other colonies view New Englanders with suspicion? What factors were beginning to change their attitudes?

In the next paragraph, Adams explains why progress is slow. What images (similes) does he use for comparison? How could you put this in your own words?

What things can Adams say in a letter to his trusted wife that he probably could not say anywhere else or to anyone else? Based on your conclusion, how might you explain the importance of letter-writing to John Adams?

FOR EIGHTH GRADE:

"George Washington's Terrible Dilemma": Letter from Washington to Secretary of War Benjamin Lincoln (5 June 1782).

Background:

Eight months after the British surrender at Yorktown, Washington is seeking his old friend's advice about whether to execute a young British prisoner in retaliation for the killing of an American prisoner of war. Read the background information in this link

<http://www.masshist.org/objects/2007october.cfm> to explore a particularly tough and terrible dilemma that brings out interesting aspects of Washington's approach to making agonizingly difficult

decisions. It also underscores that even great leaders are conflicted and that situations are rarely black and white, but usually quite complex and complicated.

Framing Questions:

Why did Washington find himself in this dilemma?

What are the questions that Washington is asking himself and Benjamin Lincoln?

What does this letter reveal about George Washington? What specific evidence can you cite for your answer?

Why does this issue represent a dilemma and not a simple, obvious decision for Washington?

How was Washington eventually able to resolve the situation? What people and actions played a part in this resolution?

Further Investigation:

List the pros and cons of each possible choice which Washington could make, outlining the short-term and long-term effects of each.

If you were Washington's trusted friend Lincoln, what would you counsel him to do? Defend your advice.

Do you agree with the way in which the episode ended? If so, why? If not, what might have been a better ending? (Is there a case to be made for procrastination at some times?)

What are some lessons we could draw from this case study of Washington in a difficult situation? Cite a circumstance in our time (either from national or world news or a more local situation) where those lessons could be applied and back up your explanation with evidence.

FOR ELEVENTH GRADE:

"The General most earnestly requires": *The Artemas Ward orderly book (3-8 July 1775)*

Background:

This is one of over 150 digitized documents from the collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society which have been brought together around fifteen topical areas and nine broad themes on a special website called *The Coming of the American Revolution* (www.masshist.org/revolution). This website, constructed especially for high school students and teachers, aims to provide the primary source documents, contextual essays, guiding questions and tools of document analysis to enable users to conduct their own research. This document can demonstrate well how to look for clues and piece together evidence in an historical investigation: note how much historical research is like good detective work.

Early battles of the Revolution are fought mainly by New England troops. If the colonies are to fight as a united body, then they must have a leader that all will agree on, and George Washington is the Congress' choice for commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. He arrives in Boston in July 1775, and works tirelessly to expel the British from Boston in the winter and spring of 1776.

In Philadelphia, many delegates are concerned by the role New England has played in the conflict so far, believing the New Englanders to be rabble-rousers and trouble-makers. If there is to be an Army of the United Colonies, it must be agreed upon and supported by all the colonies, not only those in the North. Artemas Ward has commanded the assembled troops in Cambridge for several months, but finally Congress picks a Virginian to increase the sense of colonial unity as "Chief of all the Forces Rais'd." That Virginian is George Washington.

When Washington arrives in Cambridge, he finds a motley and disorganized collection of men and armaments. Many of the New England troops are suspicious of him as an outsider, but he soon lets them know that "**The General most earnestly requires**" order and obedience. From his very first day in charge he begins issuing new sets of general orders, which are dutifully copied down and distributed by his orderlies to his officers. Artemas Ward, now officially a Major General, keeps careful notes of all the new General's rules and requirements in his Orderly Book.

Framing Questions:

What does it tell you about the state of the soldiers' camp that Washington has to give some of these orders?

Do you think the soldiers from different colonies got along? What evidence from the orderly book supports your opinion?

What regiment does Washington seem to favor? What kinds of duties does he give them?

Why would Washington forbid the firing of "small arms and Cannon?" What information might he have gathered from his earlier orders that would prompt this order?

How does Washington seek to unify his troops and give them a new identity? What language does he use?

Further Investigation:

What is the British Army in Boston doing during this same time? Is it possible to find out what kinds of orders the officers give and record? Are they issuing any proclamations or public statements?

What are people's reactions to Washington's early commands? Look at the letters and diaries of John and Abigail Adams: do the Adamses record their impressions of Washington? What about Washington's officers: do any of them leave letters or journals that might tell us how they reacted?