Some Suggestions for Teacher Use of this Literacy Resource for "Building History"

1) As students read Janney's description of an eighteenth-century kitchen, have them compile a list of the items that are described. Conduct a class discussion regarding the various items, and create a list of the items on the board, flipchart paper, or overhead transparency. Next, as a class, develop an inventory list of items commonly found in modern kitchens. Record a representative list of items on the board, flipchart paper, or overhead transparency.

Facilitate a class discussion in which you compare the two lists of kitchen items. What are the similarities? What are the differences? Some questions for students to consider include (but are not limited to):

- What is the source of heat in both kitchens? What is the source of light?
- What equipment is essential for an eighteenth-century kitchen? What equipment is essential for a modern kitchen?
- What types of items are found in *both* eighteenth-century and modern kitchens? What items are unique to an eighteenth-century kitchen?

2) Based upon the information they gleaned from the Janney description, instruct half of the students to create a drawing or diagram of an eighteenth-century kitchen. Have the other half of the class create a drawing or diagram of a modern kitchen. Divide students into teams, with each team having one student who drew an eighteenth-century kitchen and one student who drew a modern kitchen. Have students compare the two types of kitchens. Some questions for students to consider include (but are not limited to):

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Introductory Information for *John Janney's Virginia: An American Farm Lad's Life in the Early 19th Century*

Few houses in 1700s Virginia were as elegant or as spacious as the Peyton Randolph house. Even by the mid-1800s, little of that luxury had "trickled down" to people from the middling sort. Especially in the country, houses were built for function – more for shelter than for impressing neighbors. Unfortunately, while most owners of large older houses could afford to renovate and restore their dwellings, smaller country houses usually fell into disrepair and were eventually torn down. This presents a problem for modern researchers and architectural historians. Without an existing structure and the "clues" it offers, it is very difficult to reconstruct the activities that took place in an eighteenth-century household.

Another research approach is to study diaries from the period. Again, though, they provide more evidence about life in the upper classes, despite the fact that they were only a small percentage of the population. Most small farmers lacked the desire or the leisure time to keep diaries. Many of the records that do survive are logbooks, simple records of weather, purchases, etc., which include very little personal information.

The following reading is from a manuscript by John Janney, who was raised on a small Virginia farm in the 1820s and wrote down his memories of farm life many years later. His recollections are especially significant for two reasons. First, he offers enough details about the size and shape of the kitchen that a historian can "picture" or even rebuild such a space. Few descriptions from the time are this detailed. Second, Janney gives a first-hand account of why the kitchen was important in the family home and the place it had in everyday life.

John Janney's Virginia: An American Farm Lad's Life in the Early 19th Century

The Kitchen: Center of the Home

The log kitchen was but one room, which was about twenty feet square; and it was used as long as I lived there as a kitchen, dining room and sitting room. A small bed room had been partitioned off in one corner.

In the evening, after the dishes were washed and cleared off the table and the table set back, the candle stand would be moved out from its proper corner and the whole family gathered around it; some of the men reading a newspaper or a book or the women sewing or knitting, or spinning flax or tow. If there was not room around the stand for all, one or more would hang a candle on the back of a chair. The candle sticks were tall iron sticks with a hook at the top by which they could be hung on the back of a chair. The sticks were so made that they would hold three or four inches of a candle, which could be raised up by a thumb piece. If the candle was hung on the second, instead of the top slat in the chair, it would sometimes burn a black stripe on the top one. As long as my grandfather lived, until I was about eleven years old, he had a candle hung on the back of a chair for himself.

The kitchen chairs were common splint bottoms with slat backs, the splints from half to three quarters of an inch wide, and if a bottom gave out, we went into the woods, cut down a thrifty young oak tree about three inches in diameter, split it into splints and mended or put a new bottom in the chair.

On the west side of the room was the fire place, which occupied nearly the whole side of the cabin. There was but room left for a winding "kitchen stairs" up to the kitchen loft, under which was the kitchen closet and in which the iron ware, pots, kettles, bake irons and such things were kept.

On the kitchen shelves were the table ware, including pewter plates and dishes, and mugs, the spoons lying in notches along the edge of a shelf.

Travelling tinkers were not strangers. They would come at frequent intervals and mend the tinware and remould the broken pewter spoons. Tin pedlars were common with a load of tin cups, buckets, coffee pots and such. The "earthern ware" including milk pans, pie dishes, pitchers, jars and jugs were bought at the store.

We had silver spoons, both table and tea, but they were not used by the family, only when visitors or strangers were present, and there was a china teapot, sugar bowl, and teas to match, which were only used on special occasions. In every day use we had pewter spoons and dishes, among the dishes some platters twelve to fifteen inches in diameter.

The whole fireplace including the hearth was paved with large stone slabs which were hauled from a quarry five or six miles off. The fire was built with sticks or logs of woods four feet long. To build one, first put in a "backlog" six to twelve inches in diameter; then on a pair of heavy andirons (or "hand irons" as we had it) place against the backlog a "middle stick" about three or four inches in diameter; and then a forestick about six inches. Start the fire with some kindling and put in as many small sticks of wood as were deemed necessary. Chips from the woodpile made good kindling. And

"What matter how the North Wind roared –

Blow high, blow low, not all its snow
Could quench that hearth-fires ruddy glow."

Some people, for want of andirons, used stones large enough to keep the wood out of the ashes.

Our chimney was built of stone, but the pioneer chimney was usually built of wood above the fire place, small sticks, and plastered with clay inside and out. They would last many years.

Our chimney was so large that you could sit at the end of the fire, and see the stars by looking up the chimney. On two iron bars, across the chimney, was placed an oak pole about two or three inches in diameter, called the "lug-pole." On this hung the pot-hooks and "trammels." These consisted of an iron bar about an inch and a half or two inches wide with a hook at the upper end large enough to hook over the lug-pole, and at the bottom a short piece bent at right angles with a hole punched through it. Similar holes were punched through the bar all the way up about two inches apart. A rod to fit the holes in the trammel bent at the top so as to enter the holes in the bar, [with] a hook at the bottom on which to hang a pot or kettle. By means of these holes in the trammel, a pot kettle or bake iron could be raised or lowered to suit the heat.

In some of the best cabins or kitchens, instead of a lug-pole, there was a crane, which was a heavy iron rod, set in two iron eyes fastened in the chimney jamb and having another rod fastened to the top of it so as to swing out over the fire, to which pots and kettles could be hung. They could be swung off the fire to be examined.

Iron pots and brass kettles were used in every kitchen. Every family had a brass kettle for cooking fruit, making preserves and similar uses, and a large iron pot for boiling clothes on wash days. The "dinner-pot" was the one most used. It was of iron, to hold two or three gallons; and with a bail, to hang over the fire. Boiled dinners were very common; bacon and cabbage, "pickled pork" and cabbage, or salt beef and cabbage were favorite dinners and I remember them with a watery mouth. In the spring greens supplied the place of cabbage.

The "bake-iron" was a wrought iron slab about fifteen inches in diameter and half an inch thick, which had an iron handle on one side so bent and curved as to make the bake iron hang level over the fire. On it were baked buckwheat and iron cakes.

The "skillet" was cast, with three feet to stand on, a long handle cast on one side and a lid to fit the top, with a rim to hold coals on top. It was used for many purposes, cooking meat, baking biscuit, cooking hash and similar purposes. It was one of the most useful vessels about the kitchen. The stew pan has taken its place.

Frying pans were in use, differing from those now used only in the length of the iron handle. That was long enough to let the cook stand far enough from the fire for comfort, or to rest the handle on the back of a chair.

Another implement was the "spider," a small iron pot holding about three pints. It stood on three legs, usually long ones – whence its name – and had a long handle, but usually no lid. It was used for cooking or heating small quantities of any thing.

A "gridiron" was an indispensable implement in every kitchen. It has been displaced by the broiler. It was cast and large enough o hold a fresh shad, and the broiling of salt shad was the main use. We did not have steak often enough to consider it a part of our diet.

No kitchen was complete without a "dough-trough." This was a box four or five feet long, about two feet deep and the same width at the top, but narrower at the bottom, with a wide cover or "lid," which was used for making bread or pies on.

There was always a wooden "tray" in it, which was used for "mixing" bread, "working" butter and many other purposes. It was usually about two feet long by ten or twelve inches wide.

It was worked out of a log like a canoe, but it has been superseded: first by the wooden bowl, turned by machinery out of a large tree, usually Buckeye, about two feet in diameter, and now that is superceded by the tin pan. There was also a rolling pin.

There was also a Dutch oven, which was a large cast iron pan; the common ones about a foot or fifteen inches in diameter and six inches deep. It stood on three legs, and had an ear cast on opposite sides by which it could be lifted or hung over the fire, and a cover with a raised rim. In this oven they could bake bread, biscuit or pies; or roast meat, by drawing some coals out in the hearth, and putting some on the lid.

[…]

We used the first "reflector" oven in the neighborhood. It was a tin box, open in front, and the other side so curved as to reflect the heat on to whatever was in it. There was a shelf and a dripping pan, and by placing the reflector close to a hot fire, a turkey or a roast or spare ribs could be roasted or biscuits baked.

We had the first cooking stove ever seen in the neighborhood, which the women soon learned to love. It took much less wood than the fireplace, did the cooking just as well, and with much less discomfort, but it had one discomfort for me. We had no means of starting a fire in the morning, if it had gone out during the night; and it was soon found out there was no person about the house could cover the fire in it to "keep" all night but myself, so I had to stay up till all were ready for bed. I have many times gone to a neighbor's house for fire in the morning, ours having gone out, and sometimes have gone to more than one before I could get it.

Those who had a shot gun could start a fire with it, but many of the farmers had no guns. With the old fashioned flint lock fire was easily started. "Prime" the gun, hold a bunch of tow to the pan, fire the gun (that is, "flash" it, for it must not be discharged) and the tow will be set on fire. We had no gun, until a young man living with us bought one.

I had never heard of a tinderbox until a stranger came with one in his pocket. It consisted of a gun flint, such as all guns had then, a small piece of steel and a bit of tinder. Hold a bit of the tinder on top of the flint between the thumb and finger, strike the edge of the flint with the steel, and the tinder would "catch fire."

Tinder was made of charred or scorched worn cotton or linen rags, preferably linen. "Punk" would also answer. We found it in hickory logs, where they had rotted with "dry rot." It would take fire from a spark.

The fire place was so large that the fire did not occupy more than half of it. After supper in winter nights the other part was usually filled by someone who had nothing to do, or something he could do there. It was a warm place to sit in.

Into it opened the mouth of the oven. In the best kitchens the bake oven opened along side the fire place so that the oven could be attended to without going out of doors. Ours was so.

The building of the [outdoor] bake-oven was a very simple process. Build a stone foundation of the right size and height and lay a floor of smooth stone, or bricks if bricks could be had, which was very rarely, and upon this floor build up a pile of dry wood the size and shape you wished the oven to be. Old rails were best, called "oven wood" because they were used to heat the oven in the baking. And then plaster it over with mortar made of good clay, to the thickness of eight to twelve inches. A stone wall was built in front with a "mouth," through which the oven could be filled or emptied.

When the clay was fairly dry, fire was set to the wood, and a hole having been left in the rear of the oven to give it draft, the wood soon made a roaring fire which not only dried the clay, but burned it into a soft brick. Such an oven would last twenty or thirty years.

To clear out or fill the oven, an "oven peel" was used, which was a long handled wooden shovel, with which unburned coals and ashes could be shoveled out and then a large mop was used to clean the floor. Bread was sometimes baked on the oven floor.

SOURCE: Asa Moore Janney and Werner L. Janney, eds., *John Janney's Virginia: An American Farm Lad's Life in the Early 19th Century* (McLean, Va.: EPM Publications, Inc., 1978), pp. 17-23.

Glossary and Notes for *John Janney's Virginia: An American Farm Lad's Life in the Early 19th Century*

ANDIRONS – Supports for logs in a fireplace.

EARTHERN WARE – Earthen ware; utensils such as pitchers and plates made from baked clay.

FLAX – A light cloth, similar to cotton, made by spinning fibers of the flax plant.

HEARTH - The floor of and area in front of a fireplace.

KINDLING – Material, especially small dry sticks, used to start a fire.

PARTITIONED - Divided into portions or separate areas.

PUNK – Decayed wood.

QUARRY - An open excavation, usually for obtaining building stone.

TINKERS – People who traveled house to house repairing metal utensils for pay.

TOW – A rougher form of flax.

TRAMMEL – A bar from which pothooks are hung.