

## **Some Suggestions for Teacher Use of these Literacy Resources on George Washington**

1) Explain to students that many Patriot songs sung during the American Revolution consisted of new lyrics written for existing English melodies. These tunes were generally composed as reactions to an event or an action by the British government that the colonists opposed. The new lyrics were often published in local newspapers.

Give each student a copy of the words to the songs “War and Washington” and “The Surrender of Cornwallis.” Go through the words with the class and discuss the messages that the words convey. Ask students what they think the purpose of such rewritten songs was. Facilitate the discussion so that the topics of propaganda and raising support for the Patriot “cause” are addressed.

2) Distribute copies of the Parson Weems’ *The Life of Washington* excerpt and Washington’s Letter to James McHenry to the class. Read through both sources with the students. Lead a discussion exploring Washington’s activities during these two different periods of his life. Remind students of his contributions as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army and as first President of the United States.

Have students create a collage or pictorial timeline illustrating the various stages of George Washington’s life.

## **Introductory Information for the Songs “War and Washington” and “The Surrender of Cornwallis”**

One way of understanding how the everyday person in the 1700s viewed Washington is by taking a look at the popular songs of the time. These two songs, “War and Washington” and “The Surrender of Cornwallis,” were set to a tune that nearly everyone at the time knew, “The British Grenadiers.” But where “The British Grenadiers” celebrated the fighting forces of Great Britain, these songs celebrated the rival colonists. Songs like these were “of the people” – they were meant to be sung at public gatherings and gain wider support for independence.

In addition, these songs were topical; that is, they explained current events in words everyone could understand. Topical songs broadcast important events of the day; it was one way people got their news. Washington’s heroism on the battlefield is celebrated in “The Surrender of Cornwallis,” which recounts the decisive battle of Yorktown in song. Even more significant is “War and Washington.” The fourth verse depicts the general as “god-like,” with all the power and righteousness most gods had in ancient myth. In the songs of the people, Washington emerges not only as a hero to patriotic Americans but also a larger-than-life symbol of American values.

## **“War and Washington”**

Words: Jonathan Mitchell Sewall

Tune: “The British Grenadiers”

Vain Britons, boast no longer, with proud integrity,  
By land your conquering legions, your matchless strength at sea,  
Since we, your braver sons incensed, our swords have girdled on,  
Huzza, huzza, huzza, huzza, for war and Washington.

Urged on by North and vengeance, those valiant champions came,  
Loud bellowing “Tea and Treason,” and George was all on flame;  
Yet sacrilegious as it seems, we rebels still live on,  
And laugh at all their empty puffs, huzza for Washington!

Good heavens! Is this the nation whose thundering arms were hurled  
Through Europe, Africa, India? Whose navy ruled a world?  
The luster of your former deeds, whole ages of renown,  
Lost in a moment, or transferred to us and Washington!

Yet think not thirst of glory unsheathes our vengeful swords  
To rend your bands asunder, or cast away your cords  
‘Tis heaven-born freedom fires us all, and strengthens each brave son,  
For him who humbly guides the plough to god-like Washington.

Should warlike weapons fail us, disdaining slavish fears  
To swords we’ll beat our ploughshares, our pruning-hooks to spears,  
And rush, all desperate, on our foe, nor breathe till battle won,  
Then shout, and shout America! and conquering Washington!

SOURCE: Irwin Silber, ed. Songs of Independence. New York: Stackpole, 1973, p. 97.

## “The Surrender of Cornwallis”

Tune: “The British Grenadiers”

1. Come all you bold Americans,  
The truth to you I'll tell,  
'Tis of a sad misfortune  
Which late on Britain fell;  
'Twas all in the heights of Yorktown,  
Where cannons loud did roar  
They summoned Lord Cornwallis  
To fight or else give o'er.
2. A summons to surrender  
Was sent unto the Lord,  
Which made him feel like poor Burgoyne  
And quickly draw his sword,  
“Must I give o'er these glittering troops,  
These ships and Hessians, too  
And yield to General Washington  
And his bold rebel crew?”
3. A council to surrender,  
This lord did then command,  
“What say you, my brave heroes,  
To yield you must depend;  
For don't you see the bomb-shells fly,  
And cannons loud do roar,  
DeGrasse is in the harbor  
And Washington's on shore.”
4. 'Twas the nineteenth of October  
In the year of eighty-one,  
Cornwallis did surrender  
To General Washington.  
Six thousand chosen British troops  
Marched out and grounded arms,  
Huzza, ye bold Americans,  
For now sweet music charms.
5. Six thousand chosen British troops  
To Washington resigned,  
Besides some ships and Hessians,  
That could not stay behind;  
With refugees and blackamores,  
Oh, what a direful crew!  
It was then he had some thousands,  
But now he's got but a few.
6. My lord has gone to New York,  
Sir Harry for to see;  
For to send home this dreadful news  
Unto his majesty:  
To contradict some former lines  
Which he before had sent,  
That he and his bold British troops  
Would conquer where they went.
7. Here's a health to General Washington,  
And his brave army, too,  
And likewise to our worthy Greene,  
To him much honor's due.  
May we subdue those English troops  
And clear the eastern shore,  
That we may live in peace, my boys,  
Whilst wars there are no more.

**SOURCE:** Irwin Silber, ed. *Songs of Independence*. (New York: Stackpole, 1973), pp. 139-140.

## **Glossary and Notes for the Songs “War and Washington” and “The Surrender of Cornwallis”**

**BLACKAMORES** – Africans.

**BURGOYNE** – British General John Burgoyne, who surrendered to American General Horatio Gates at Saratoga, New York on October 17, 1777. Before Yorktown, this was the most significant British surrender of the war.

**CORNWALLIS** – British General Charles Cornwallis, commander of British forces in the South. His surrender to George Washington at Yorktown, Virginia in October 1781 signaled the end of the Revolutionary War.

**DEGRASSE** – French Naval Officer F.J.P de Grasse-Tilly. His arrival in the Chesapeake Bay with 28 French ships emboldened Generals Washington and Rochembeau to attack Cornwallis’s troops at Yorktown.

**DIREFUL** – Frightening.

**DISDAINING** – Scorning.

**GREENE** – General Nathaniel Greene, whose forces had fought Cornwallis’s and, many believe, wore them down before the battle of Yorktown.

**HESSIANS** – German mercenaries; soldiers for hire.

**HUZZA** – Hooray! Originally a cheer by used by British troops that was later adopted by Americans.

**INCENSED** – Angered.

**IS THIS THE NATION WHOSE THUNDERING ARMS WERE HURLED / THROUGH EUROPE, AFRICA, INDIA? WHOSE NAVY RULED A WORLD?** – At one time the British Empire reached around the world. The song mocks the powerful country’s inability to stop a revolution in its own colonies.

**LUSTRE [LUSTER]** – Glory.

**REND YOUR BANDS ASUNDER** – Literally, “tear off your hold on us.” Figuratively, to separate from Great Britain.

**SIR HARRY** – Sir Henry Clinton, British general under Cornwallis at Yorktown.

**SLAVISH** – Simple-minded.

**TO SWORDS WE'LL BEAT OUR PLOUGHSHARES** – Stop farming and start engaging in battle.

**YORKTOWN** – The decisive battle in the Revolutionary War. Surrounded by American and French troops, British General Charles Cornwallis surrendered to George Washington on October 18, 1781.

## **Introductory Information for Washington's Letter to James McHenry**

Although George Washington wrote many letters by today's standards, his letters do not fill as many volumes or get quoted as often as those of contemporaries like John Adams or Thomas Jefferson. Washington's reputation is based more on his military and political life than his writings. While many of his letters may seem "dry" at first glance, they often reveal a sly wit. In this 1797 letter to his former Secretary of War James McHenry, Washington the man disposes with the myth. He avoids making grand statements in his letter, focusing instead on describing his post-Presidential daily routine. After almost forty years in the public eye, it seems Washington was eager to be less of a public figure and more of a private citizen.

## Washington's Letter to James McHenry

Mount Vernon, May 29, 1797.

Dear Sir: I am indebted to you for several unacknowledged letters; but ne'er mind that; go on as if you had them. You are at the source of information, and can find many things to relate; while I have nothing to say, that could either inform or amuse a Secretary of War in Philadelphia.

I might tell him that I begin my diurnal course with the Sun; that if my hirelings are not in their places at that time I send them messages expressive of my sorrow for their indisposition; then having put these wheels in motion, I examine the state of things further; and the more they are probed, the deeper I find the wounds are which my buildings have sustained by an absence and neglect of eight years; by the time I have accomplished these matters, breakfast (a little after seven O'clock, about the time I presume you are taking leave of Mrs. McHenry) is ready. This over, I mount my horse and ride around my farms, which employs me until it is time to dress for dinner, at which I rarely miss seeing strange faces; come, as they say, out of respect to me. Pray, would not the word curiosity answer as well? And how different this, from having a few social friends at a cheerful board? The usual time of sitting at Table; a walk, and Tea, brings me within the dawn of candlelight; previous to which, if not prevented by company, I resolve, that, as soon as the glimmering taper, supplies the place of the great luminary, I will retire to my writing Table and acknowledge the letters I have received; but when the lights are brought, I feel tired, and disinclined to engage in this work, conceiving that the next night will do as well: the next comes and with it the same causes for postponement, and effect, and so on.

This will account for *your* letter remaining so long unacknowledged; and having given you the history of a day, it will serve for a year; and I am persuaded you will not require a second edition of it: but it may strike you, that in this detail no mention is made of any portion of time allotted for reading; the remark would be just, for I have not looked into a book since I came home, nor shall I be able to do it until I have discharged my Workmen; probably not before the nights grow longer; when possibly, I may be looking in doomsday book. On the score of the plated ware in your possession I will say something in a future letter. At present I shall only add, that I am always and affectionately yours.

SOURCE: George Washington, Writings. Ed. John Rhodehamel. New York: Library of America, 1997, pp. 996-997.

## **Glossary and Notes for Washington's Letter to James McHenry**

**DIURNAL** – Daily.

**INDISPOSITION** – An inability to attend.

**LUMINARY** – A light source; in this case, probably a gas lamp.

**TAPER** – A small candle.

## **Introductory Information for Parson Weems' *The Life of Washington***

Parson Weems compiled material about George Washington – legends spread by word of mouth – and polished them into a work of myth entitled *The Life of Washington*. The book, published in 1800, presented young George Washington's life in a series of parables, or stories with symbolic action and a moral message. Published only a few months after Washington's death, when the young nation was mourning the loss of its first and most beloved leader, *The Life of Washington* was highly successful. This was due in part to the book's constant reprinting. Portions of the book were reprinted in pamphlets (the equivalent of today's paperbacks), ensuring that nearly everyone could afford a copy. In time, these stories became word of mouth again, as people learned the tales of Washington (like the "cherry tree" story) from elders rather than the book itself. Stories about the young Washington's honesty, integrity, and physical strength were important to a young nation eager to shape its own collective character.

## Parson Weems' *The Life of Washington*

Born to be a soldier, Washington early discovered symptoms of nature's intentions towards him. In his 11<sup>th</sup> year, while at school under old Mr. Hobby, he used to divide his play-mates into two parties, or armies. One of these, for distinction sake, was called French, the other American. A big boy at the school, named William Bustle, commanded the former, George commanded the latter. And every day, at play-time, with corn-stalks for muskets, and calabashes for drums, the two armies would turn out, and march, and counter-march, and file off or fight their mimic battles, with great fury. This was fine sport for George, whose passion for active exercise was so strong, that at play-time no weather could keep him within doors. His fair cousins, who visited at his mother's, used to complain, that "George was not fond of their company, like other boys; but soon as he had got his task, would run out to play." But such trifling play as marbles and tops he could never abide. They did not afford him exercise enough. His delight was in that of the manliest sort, which, by stringing the limbs and swelling the muscles, promotes the kindest flow of blood and spirits. At jumping with a long pole, or heaving heavy weights, for his years he hardly had an equal. And as to running, the swift-footed Achilles could scarcely have matched his speed.

"Egad! He ran wonderfully," said my amiable and aged friend, John Fitzhugh, esq. who knew him well. "We had nobody hereabouts, that could come near him. There was young Langhorn Dade, of Westmoreland, a confounded clean made, tight fellow, and a mighty swift runner too...but then he was no match for George: Langy, indeed, did not like to give it up; and would brag that he had sometimes brought George to a tie. But I believe he was mistaken: for I have seen them run together many a time; and George always beat him easy enough."

Col. Lewis Willis, his play-mate and kinsman, has been heard to say, that he has often seen him throw a stone across Rappahannock, at the lower ferry of Fredricksburg. It would be no easy matter to find a man, now-a-days, who could do it.

**SOURCE:** Mason L. Weems, *The Life of Washington*. Ed. Marcus Cunliffe. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), pp. 20-21.

## **Glossary and Notes for Parson Weems' *The Life of Washington***

**ABIDE** – Tolerate.

**CALABASHES** – A large, rounded fruit; a gourd.

**CONFOUNDED** – Extreme.

**EGAD** – A statement of amazement.

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**RAPPAHANNOCK** – A river in Northern Virginia.

**TRIFLING** – Unimportant.