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Colonial Living: A Look at the Arts, Crafts, History, and Literature of Early Americans

Curriculum Unit 92.04.02
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What facts do students know about the colonial history of our country? What information have they been previously taught in school? Do they know about our founding fathers? Are they aware of the battles that were fought for freedom? Do they know how people lived over two hundred years ago in the United States? Most importantly do they even care about the past? Can my students see the relevance of our nation's history and the effect it has on our lives today? One 6th grade student recently asked me during a discussion on the English settlement of Connecticut, "Where were the black people when these battles with the Indians were taking place? How do people other than white English and Dutch men fit into the picture? What is my history?" This curriculum unit has been designed to answer these questions. I am creating this "look" at our country's colonial era and the Revolutionary War to introduce my 5th grade students to the early period of our nation's history and to make this study of our past both informative and relevant to the middle school student of the 1990's. I will use this teaching unit in two courses, Language Arts and Social Studies, and we will spend most of the year pursuing this study of colonial life. I want to share with my students a history that tells the true stories of both the European colonist and the African slave and of how these two groups built our country into the leading democratic nation it is today.

I teach Language Arts and Social Studies at the Betsy Ross Arts Magnet School in New Haven, Connecticut. I teach these two subjects to remedial students and problem learners. Children are placed in my classroom because they need a lot of support and structure in their learning environment. Traditional methods of instruction do not always work for these children. I have to be creative and flexible in choosing my classroom materials and strategies. I teach the same group of students both Language Arts and Social Studies so I have the freedom to create a unit that will be integrated and used in both courses.

My students learn the most when they are actively engaged in the learning process. I will make the learning of American history significant for them by making the lessons interactive. This is a hands-on curriculum. The children will learn about our country's colonial period by reading, writing, discussing, researching, experimenting, and making things. Because these 5th grade students attend an Arts Magnet school they are used to problem solving and learning by experimenting with a wide variety of styles and skills, but this approach can work for any teacher and any group of students. My experience has taught me that even the most difficult child can learn when he is involved and relevantly engaged in the classroom. I think that the key word here is relevance. Rather than just teach this subject directly from the textbook I will use a broad selection of written materials, historical sources, and learning activities that will make the subject of colonial

America meaningful for my students. I am also taking great care to teach the history of all Americans especially those of color and to accurately portray the difficult lives they led while making vital contributions to our nation's culture.

This curriculum unit has been structured so that the subject matter and materials flow evenly between the Language Arts and Social Studies curriculums. I have found that this approach helps my students to organize their thoughts and to make sense of the facts they are learning for themselves. They will be introduced to the history of the colonial period through the literature they read in English class as well as through the nonfiction materials they find in their Social Studies text and supplemental learning sources. The literature component of this curriculum unit is comprised of three historical novels written for children as well as some biographical pieces and picture books written about famous colonial and Revolutionary War leaders.

The literature portion of this curriculum will begin in Language Arts class with the reading of *Phoebe the Spy* by Judith Berry Griffen. *Phoebe the Spy* is an easy to read novel written at about a third grade level. The vocabulary and content are simple, but the story remains very engaging and entertaining. I know my students will enjoy this book because it will bring them pleasure as they are learning historical facts. I feel it is a great starting point. I have taught this novel before so I am confident about its success in the classroom.

Phoebe the Spy is a fictional telling of the involvement of Phoebe Fraunces in protecting General George Washington from an assassination attempt. Phoebe's father is Sam Fraunces, a free black man who owned the Queen's Head Tavern in New York City which he allowed the Patriots to use as a meeting place in the novel. The tavern was renamed the Fraunces Tavern after the Revolutionary War and a later version of the inn (The tavern burned down twice and its original form is not really known.) is still standing in New York City today where visitors can explore a museum on the site as well as share a meal in the colonial dining room.

Phoebe Fraunces is thirteen years old when the novel begins. She works for her father who is a friend that supplies the Patriots with food for the soldiers as well as a place to meet. He has heard that General Washington is in grave danger; there is a plot to take his life. Sam Fraunces knows that the general will be arriving in New York in a few days to take up residence in Mortier House on Richmond Hill and he asks Phoebe to be a spy. Sam Fraunces arranges for Phoebe to become General Washington's housekeeper. Sam asks Phoebe to keep her eyes and ears open for any signs of danger. He warns her to never act alone and to trust no one. She will pretend not to know Sam, but they will meet secretly in the market daily where she will clue him in on her observations of the Washington household. Phoebe saves the day when she catches the assassin just as he is about to strike. She thwarts his plan using her intelligence and common sense. She saves General Washington's life and retires as a spy.

This novel about Phoebe Fraunces is informative, educational, and entertaining. It is fiction though based somewhat on historical fact. A significant reference source for this unit is Cobblestone magazine, "The History Magazine for Young People." Each monthly issue of Cobblestone is dedicated to one subject, person, or incident found in American history. In the August 1987 issue of Cobblestone, which is dedicated to the subject of "British Loyalists in the Revolutionary Era," there is a brief article called "The Plot to Kidnap Washington." It describes several of the characters found in *Phoebe the Spy* and is the truthful incident upon which this novel is based.

The book, *Phoebe the Spy*, also begins to answer the question my student posed regarding the role of African-Americans in our country's early days. The search for an answer to this question will continue as the students read the second novel of this unit, *War Comes to Willy Freeman* by James Lincoln Collier and Christopher Collier.

War Comes to Willy Freeman is a dynamic and exciting piece of historical fiction. It is written at a 6th grade reading level so it will be a challenge academically for my students. We will read most of this novel out loud and together in class. This novel is well worth the struggle though as it depicts a more realistic view of many of the same people and places found in *Phoebe the Spy*. *Phoebe the Spy* is an excellent children's novel. *War Comes to Willy Freeman* was written for adolescents and therefore has more substance and "meat on its bones."

War Comes to Willy Freeman is again about a black heroine, Wilhelmina Freeman. The novel is set in Connecticut and in New York city during the Revolutionary war. Willy is a free black because her father enlisted in the militia. His master, Colonel Ledyard, then gave Willy and her mother their freedom as well. Willy is thirteen and just getting used to the new last name her father chose for his family because it proclaims their new status.

The novel opens in Groton, Connecticut at the Freeman home near Fort Griswold. The Redcoats are attacking the fort and Willy's father leaves his family to join in the battle against the wishes of his wife. Willy, wearing her milking britches, is asked by her father to ride with him to the fort and to then return to her mother with the family horse. When Willy and her father get to the fort the English have already begun their attack. Willy is swept up in the battle and unable to return home. The English soldiers overtake the fort and Willy witnesses the brutal death of her father. She is about to be captured when she begs for mercy and reveals that even though she is dressed like a boy, she is really a girl. The Redcoat soldier allows Willy to escape and she runs for home devastated by the battle has just witnessed.

When Willy reaches her home she truly learns the meaning of despair as she discovers that her mother has been captured by the British. She steals her father's small boat and journeys to Stratford where her mother's relatives are still house slaves for the cruel Ivers family. Willy learns that her mother may be a prisoner in New York city so she makes her way there. In New York she is befriended by a servant who works for Sam Fraunces at his tavern. Sam hires Willy who works for him while she searches for her mother. Willy is tragically reunited with her mother at the end of the novel, but not until she has had many adventures that depict realistically the lives of slaves and free black men and women at this time. Their's was a harsh existence that took great strength and courage to survive.

I know that students will be fascinated with the character of Willy Freeman because she addresses so many of the issues of concern to them: adolescence, being female, freedom, slavery, and family. It is also interesting to meet up with a very different Sam Fraunces. The British have sealed off New York city. Most of Sam's patrons are English soldiers and he must be very careful with his true feelings and loyalties. The Colliers also state at the end of the novel, where they share the facts behind the fiction, that very little is known about Sam Fraunces except that he was born in the West Indies and became a successful businessman in New York. It is assumed that he was black because he was called "Black Sam," but he may have been white or of a mixed heritage. I think it will be interesting for the students to research some of the people and events they read about in these novels and to separate the fact from the fiction for themselves. The Comptons encyclopedia that is part of the classroom computer system will be a good place to begin this type of work. The students will also be able to make use of the computer's word processor and note taking programs while doing their research.

I will use a third novel by the Collier brothers, *My Brother Sam Is Dead*, only if I feel the students are still motivated and eager to read more about this period of time. I hope my students want to continue to pursue this theme as *My Brother Sam Is Dead* is an excellent award winning novel that is a poignant and all too real

tragedy. Again this novel is set in Connecticut. It takes place in the small town of Redding and deals with the Meeker family who are torn apart by their different views of the war. The story is told by young Tim Meeker whose older brother Sam argues with his father over the politics of the Tories and the Patriots. Sam causes his family severe anguish when he runs away to fight with the Continental Army. Redding is a Tory town in a Patriot state and its inhabitants suffer greatly during the war.

This book realistically deals with the rigors of war and gives a male perspective the previous novels have not. Though the Meekers are a somewhat typical white colonial family this is a very personal novel that transcends the issue of race and speaks to the topic of war detailing why it is fought and what its harsh realities are. One of the most powerful moments depicted in the book is the death of a patriot slave, Ned. Tim witnesses his brutal murder at the hands of the British soldiers and it forces him to rethink his loyalties. The Patriots are also depicted in a harsh and realistic light. Tim's father is arrested by them and thrown into a horrible prison for allegedly selling his beef cattle to the British. The novel ends tragically with Sam being executed by the Patriots for supposedly stealing cows from his own family. Sam is set up, of course, and used as an example by his leader, General Putnam, who has been so hardened by the war he will not listen to reason and is only looking for a scapegoat. Tim Meeker asks the questions on every reader's mind in the epilogue: "Was this war worth fighting? Is any war worth fighting? Could the struggle have been overcome any other way?"

I think this novel will enhance our study of the Revolutionary War by giving the soldiers and common players a face the students will recognize and feel empathy for. The Meeker family runs a tavern just as the characters in the previous two novels did. A tavern was the center of activity in a village or town. Many of the skills and trades vital to survival in colonial life could be clearly seen in the daily goings-on of an inn. The students will be first introduced to the elements of daily colonial life by looking at the chores depicted in these three novels. Our study of everyday living will serve as a transition into the non-fiction historical section of this curriculum unit.

The students will keep reading journals while reading these historical novels. They will be asked to reflect on what they have read and to keep track of any questions or thoughts they have while we are studying these stories. I will ask them to particularly deal with the concept of fact versus fiction and to look for the names of people, places, and situations they may want to do further research on. Class discussions will be very important and will guide me in deciding what specific projects and activities we will do as follow-up to the reading of these books. The students will also do some creative writing activities based on their responses to the reading. I will ask students to use playwriting skills in scripting scenes from the novels. These scenes will be shared in class through staged readings and dramatizations.

The Language Arts portion of this curriculum unit will be fleshed out with short biographical pieces on such famous African-Americans as Phyllis Wheatley, Crispus Attucks, Benjamin Banneker, Jupiter Hammon, and Jean Baptiste Pont DuSable. The students will meet the founding fathers through the clever novels of Jean Fritz. Ms. Fritz has written a series of historical books for young readers with delightful titles and charming pictures by illustrators such as Tomie dePaola. Her books are written for elementary school students but, I think they can be useful because they are so fact filled and fun. I will use some of the books as read-aloud materials to be read by myself or individual students to the class. These books will also serve as pleasure reading books during class quiet time or when a child has finished his class work. They are a simple, yet entertaining way to share factual knowledge. My favorites are *Can't You Make Them Behave, King George?*, *What's the Big Idea, Ben Franklin?*, and *Where was Patrick Henry on the 29th of May?*. I also plan to use the picture books of Ingri and Edgar Parin D'Aulaire that they wrote for young people based on the lives of George Washington and Benjamin Franklin.

Cobblestone magazine will also be an excellent resource for biographical material. The April 1992 issue is centered on George Washington and his life achievements and the September 1989 issue is about the life and deeds of Thomas Jefferson. Of particular interest to this unit will be the article on George Washington titled, "Washington and Slavery" by John Riley and Trudi Riley. I also think that my students will enjoy reading "The Life and Lore of George Washington" by Brandon Miller as found in the July 1983 Cobblestone on "Folklore: Stories and More." I will use several issues of Cobblestone to anchor the unit in fact. These issues include February 1983, "Black History Month: The Struggle for Rights" and the article by Laurel Sherman, "The Slavery Years"; February 1990, "The People of Williamsburg" including the articles, "Judith: The Life of a Slave" and "Slave Boy-Skeleton Head: A Slave's Tale; and June 1990 "Colonial Craftsmen" with two articles by Robert D. San Souci, "Craftsmen, Artisans, & Tradesman" and "The Apprentice System." These articles are all well researched, informative, and at a reading level my students can grasp. Cobblestone magazine is an excellent resource that will supplement and enhance all of the non-fiction information found in the Social Studies text as well as the biographical and historical literature used in this unit.

The Language Arts component of this curriculum unit deals almost exclusively with the fictional interpretation of historical facts. The Social Studies portion of this unit will deal exclusively with fact. The main source for this study of historical fact will be the fifth grade Social Studies textbook, *Living in Our Country*, published by the Laidlaw Company. Chapter 13 deals with "Life in the English Colonies" looking at the three regions of New England, the Middle colonies, and the South. Chapter 14 is titled "From Many Colonies to One Nation" and deals with why the colonies went to war against England and the struggle for independence. Reading this text will give my students a knowledge base that will be supplemented by articles from Cobblestone magazine and the literature read in the Language Arts class.

The students and I will look most closely at two groups of colonists: the settlements of New England and the plantations of the South. We will study several groups of people that lived in these colonies: the free blacks and slaves of New England, the slaves of the South, the traditional New Englander, and the traditional Southern colonist. We will study these regions and people by looking at various portraits and works of art, common colonial crafts and skills, and the historical facts found in the variety of sources previously mentioned.

Our school library at the Betsy Ross Arts Magnet will be a prime resource in this study of colonial history. The 5th grade Social Studies text deals with the colonial regions and the history of the United States. We will use it as a foundation, yet we will go beyond its boundaries by also using the wide variety of materials available in the school library. There I found several series on colonial crafts and skills by authors such as Leonard Everett Fisher, Bobbie Kalman, and Edward Tunis. I will use these books to give my students a knowledge of three specific skills: quilting, cooking, and the use of household fruits and vegetables to naturally dye fabric. We will have several lessons in class where children will get to use this new knowledge by actually cooking colonial food dishes (such as the johnny cake mentioned in *My Brother Sam Is Dead*), making a small quilt square, and using plants and berries to dye muslin fabric.

Each student will be asked to do a research project wherein they will learn about a colonial skill or craft. The children will research their topic by using the school library as well as the Comptons Encyclopedia found in our computer system. Students will use the classroom computers to not only research their craft projects, but to write portions of the report and to take notes using the word processor and classroom printer. The project will also include an oral report. During this report students will share the knowledge they have learned about their craft and if possible they will use visual aids to exhibit and demonstrate their chosen skill. We will learn about how many of the talented crafts people were slaves or free black men and women who performed these skills

on both the farm and in the city.

I plan to use a book, *Blacks in America 1619-1790*, as a supplemental text. This book was written for young people and accurately discusses in a language most of my students will grasp what life was like for the Africans who were brought to America as slaves and for the blacks who were able to earn their freedom. The book also uses drawings and art from the period to illustrate its message. It is a book that accurately portrays the harsh life that African-Americans were forced to live from the first Africans who were sent to Jamestown in 1619 and sold to the colonists as indentured servants in exchange for food to their later brethren who were part of the triangular slave trade route. It also tells the true story of the few blacks able to buy or earn their freedom. It is a grim history that must be told, but in a balanced manner. I found this text to be very informative as I discovered that life was not much better for blacks in the north than it was for them in the south. I was surprised to learn of the numbers of slaves that were to be found in New England and how much of the slave trade originated in the shipping industries of the north. It was also discouraging to know how few people really fought for the rights of blacks when our new government and its laws were being created. I can see how I will have to create a unit in the future that takes the story of African Americans and their struggle for freedom on to the Civil War in the 19th century and into the 20th century and the battle for civil and voting rights. I will ask my students to compare the lives they read about in this book with the lives of the white colonists we study as well as the more traditional view of history found in our text.

This textbook will lead us into the study of paintings of the era to see the regional and racial lifestyle differences. I have discovered two art books written for a young audience that I think will be informative. Both books are by Rena Neumann Coen. They are *The Black Man In Art* and *American History in Art*. I will take my students to the New Haven Colony Historical Society to view its paintings and colonial artifacts as well as to see the American collection at the Yale Art Gallery. We will also visit the Pardee-Morris house to get a feel for colonial home life. I think it is very important that my students see as many authentic paintings and household items from this time as is possible. I know from my own experiences as a child that history didn't really have meaning for me until I could connect it to real people, places, and things.

This curriculum unit will introduce my students to a very important segment of our nation's history that they all too seldom study and understand. There is so much to do during the school day and school year that as teachers we sometimes unwillingly rush our students through the curriculum. For once I am going to take the time to do something right. By the end of this course of study my students will have grown as readers, writers, researchers, and citizens. I hope that I am able to answer that one child's plea which I know is on the minds of all of my students living in these difficult and disenfranchised times. I want my students to understand their past and to feel connected to their present. I hope that this unit on colonial life will help myself and other teachers achieve that goal.

Sample Lesson Plans

Activity #1: Colonial Cooking

These simple recipes are traditional colonial fare. They can be prepared in school or at home. Both recipes need an oven.

New England: Johnny-Cake

(from *The Little House Cookbook* by Barbara M. Walker)

Johnny cake was a traditional New England food and a diet staple. The students will be aware of this dish because it is mentioned in *My Brother Sam Is Dead* .

For six servings you will need:

(Triple or quadruple this recipe to feed an average class of students.)

Cornmeal, 2 cups stoneground white or yellow

Salt, 1 teaspoon

Baking soda, 1 teaspoon

Drippings, 2 tablespoons

Molasses, 2 tablespoons

Cultured buttermilk, 1 cup

Bowl, 2-quart; baking sheet

In the bowl mix well the cornmeal, salt, and baking soda. Place the drippings in the center. Stir molasses into 1/2 cup boiling water, and pour the mixture on the drippings. Stir until the drippings are melted and meal mixture becomes a paste. Stir in the buttermilk and mix well. Grease the baking sheet and pour the batter onto it, spreading it evenly by tilting the sheet or by pressing with a wet hand.

Preheat oven to 400°F. Bake for 20 to 30 minutes, until dough surface is cracked and the edges are browned. Remove from the pan before it cools.

Cut or break into squares. Serve warm with honey, molasses, baked beans, or boiled cabbage and meat.

The South: Williamsburg Jumbals

(from Cobblestone magazine, February 1990: "The People of Williamsburg," pg. 10—from *The Williamsburg Art of Cookery* , adapted from Mrs. E. Smith's recipe of 1742.)

These cookies have a spicy taste and a crisp, light texture.

Ingredients:

one-third cup of butter

one-third cup of fine sugar

one well-beaten egg

three-fourths cup of flour
one-fourth teaspoon salt
one teaspoon of powdered mace**

**Cinnamon or nutmeg may be substituted for mace.

mixing bowl

buttered tin or cookie sheet

Mix together one-third of a cup of butter and the same of fine sugar. Add one well-beaten egg. Sift in three-fourths cup of flour with one-fourth teaspoon of salt and one teaspoon of powdered mace. Drop by spoonfuls far apart on a buttered tin, spread thin, and bake in a moderate oven (350°F) about ten minutes.

Activity #2: Quilting

The students should first become familiar with the art of quilting. An excellent article to share with them is “A Quilt Is Something Human” from *The Foxfire Book*. There are also two articles in *Cobblestone* magazine, July 1983 “Folklore: Stories and More”—pg. 27 29, “Sewing Up a Story” by Mary W. Roe and in August 1991 “America’s Folk Art”—pgs. 20 & 21, “Patchwork Art” by Mary Morton Cowan.

I also plan to read to the students a picture book about the art of quilting that I think will help this craft take on a deeper meaning for them. The book is a Reading Rainbow selection called *The Patchwork Quilt* by Valerie Flourney. It is the story of a little girl who loves to watch her grandmother quilt using patches of old fabric. When the grandmother is taken ill the little girl surprises her by leading the family in finishing this memory quilt. It is a book steeped in the importance of keeping a sense of your past and your family heritage.

The quilting activity described here is very simple and does not require any sewing. It can easily be made more difficult by using fabric and thread though.

Materials:

glue
scissors
squares of colored paper
a large sheet or roll of paper to serve as the background
scraps of colored paper, tissue, yarn, ribbon, wrapping
paper, sequins, buttons, or any “found” materials

Each student is given a similar size piece of colored paper. This is the quilt block. Using the scraps and “found” materials each child creates his own “quilt” square. A traditional pattern can be used or each square can be unique as in a crazy quilt. Students may choose to follow the African-American tradition of making a picture or story quilt. The teacher, with student assistance, then mounts each square onto the background. The class will have created its own quilt. This quilt should be proudly and prominently displayed.

Activity #3: Dyeing Fabric With Household Fruits and Vegetables

The colonists had to weave their own fabric as well as make most of their own clothes. The most common dyes available to them were the colors found in nature. By using the plants and vegetables found in their own gardens and in the wilds around them they could make natural dyes that produced clear, though somewhat muted color.

Each student will be given a solid block of 100% cotton fabric as well as some scrap pieces. Only natural fabrics such as cotton and wool will truly take the color found in these natural dyes. Manmade fabrics such as nylon, polyester, or blends will not take or hold the color. Students should understand that these dyes will not be as bright as the colors they are used to seeing today in our clothing and household goods. These natural colors will be softer and muted in their shades. Every dye lot will be different as well depending on such variables as how long the fabric sits in the dye bath or how the dye is mixed with water.

After dyeing his or her fabric pieces each student will decide whether he or she wants to make a sewn quilt square or a small braided mat. The mat can be made just like a braided rug. Three strips of fabric are sewn together at the top and then braided. The braids are coiled together and stitched to make a mini-rug or mat. These braided mats are an excellent use of scrap fabrics and a way to recycle clean, old clothing. Both products are simple to make and the type of craft that the colonial housewife produced on a regular basis.

Natural Dye Recipes

(Sources are my own recipes with additional ideas being inspired by *Let's Be Early Settlers With Daniel Boone* by Peggy Parish.)

Suggested Tips For Successful Dyeing

Use a bowl or pan large enough to hold the dye and the fabric.

Always wet the fabric thoroughly before dyeing.

Stir the fabric in the dye to see that the color sets evenly.

Wring the fabric thoroughly of the dye when finished. You may set the dye by rinsing the fabric in cold water.

Hang the fabric in a clear area. Do not use it until it is completely dried. Darker colors made need to be in the dye bath two or three times until the desired color is achieved. The color will always appear darker when it is wet.

Yellow

Use the dry skins of yellow onions. Pour hot water over the skins and let them soak overnight. Strain off the liquid. Throw away the skins.

Brown

Make a very strong solution of tea using several tea bags and boiling water. Let the mixture cool. Throw away the tea bags.

Pink

Take a quart of very ripe strawberries or raspberries. Soak them overnight in hot water. Strain the liquid from the berries. Throw away the berries.

Blue/Purple

Follow the recipe above using blueberries or purple grapes such as concord grapes. Experiment with different fruits to make your own colors. Just think of what naturally stains your clothing. Ha! Ha!

Green

You can achieve a light shade of green by grinding spinach in a food processor and straining the liquid through a piece of cheesecloth. Mix this liquid with hot water. The more water you use in ratio to the spinach liquid the lighter the dye will be.

Red

Grate a beet and strain the pulp through a piece of cheesecloth. You can mix this liquid with some hot water to achieve a light red.

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Cobblestone: The History Magazine for Young People published by Cobblestone Publishing Inc., 30
Grove Street, Peterborough, New Hampshire 03458
(603)924-7209

America's Folk Art August 1991

Black History Month: The Struggle for Rights February 1983

British Loyalists in the Revolutionary Era August 1987

Colonial Craftsmen June 1990

Folklore: Stories and More July 1983

Thomas Jefferson September 1989

The People of Williamsburg February 1990

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