

Summer Teachers Institute, 2010
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Exercise: George Washington's Diary Assignment and Reading Questions

Assignment:

- I. Read George Washington's diary entry for Wednesday, October 28, 1789
- II. Read Joseph Barrell's letter to Samuel Blachley Webb, November 1, 1789
- III. Compose your own description of Washington's visit to the duck (sailcloth) factory, taking into account what you learned from each of these primary sources.

Reading Questions:

(Use these as guides to your thinking as you work on this assignment - and also with the rest of the diary entries Washington made during his New England tour, October 15 - November 13, 1789 and with the additional primary sources.)

1. Why do you think George Washington was interested in visiting the "duck manufactory," (which made strong cloth used in sailmaking) and the card factory (which made cards for combing raw wool) in Boston? He visited many such factories on his New England tour. What was the significance of textile production for him? What does Joseph Barrell have to say about Washington's visit to the "duck manufactory"?

Think about: the role of American cloth during the boycotts of the Revolution; Washington's commissioning of a suit of cloth woven in Hartford, Connecticut for his inauguration; Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists' interest in manufacturing; Hamilton's "Report on Manufactures" of 1791; southern slavery and cotton production; Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin in 1793; the production of flax, wool, and even silk in New England.

2. What does Joseph Barrell's letter describing Washington's visit to Boston tell you about the way he and other Bostonians regarded George Washington? Note that Barrell refers to Washington as "His Majesty."

3. Compare Joseph Barrell's description of Washington's experiences in Boston to Washington's own descriptions of those experiences.

4. What do you learn about Washington's perspective on "the ladies" from his diary, from Joseph Barrell's letter, and from William Bentley's diary? What does Washington himself have to say about the girls and women he encountered, both in factories and in ceremonial events held

on his behalf? What can you learn about the lives of girls and women from these sources?

5. On his tour Washington observed people working at different occupations: as spinners and weavers, fishermen, farmers, seamen, and tavern-keepers. What does Washington have to say about workers and their work?

6. There had never been many slaves in Massachusetts, and slavery ended there in the 1780s, as it did in all the northern states in the late-eighteenth, early-nineteenth centuries. Washington, who lived in Virginia, was a large slaveowner. Why do you think he was silent about this very noticeable difference between his home state and Massachusetts? Try comparing the slave populations of Massachusetts and Virginia in 1790 using the Historical Census Browser, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/index.html>.

7. What does the misunderstanding between George Washington and John Hancock, then Governor of Massachusetts, reveal about what each of these men believed about how the president of the United States should be treated?

8. How would you compare Jacques Pierre Brissot de Warville's perceptions of Boston and Cambridge and the people he met there with George Washington's descriptions of the same people and places? What does Jacques Pierre Brissot de Warville say about John Hancock?

9. Compare the prospects of science and technology in the United States in 1788-1789. For evidence, compare Brissot de Warville's conversation with Joseph Pope, creator of the Harvard orrery (a model of the solar system) with Washington's observations on textile factories, roads, and bridges.

10. Describe the celebrations organized for Washington by the townspeople of Cambridge, Boston, and Salem. How do Washington, Joseph Barrell, William Bentley, the *Boston Gazette*, and the *Pennsylvania Packet* describe them?

11. What does George Washington say were his views on ceremonies, dinners, and parades, such as the ones arranged for him in Cambridge, Boston, and Salem? How do you interpret his stance?

12. Compare William Bentley's description of Washington's experiences in Salem to Washington's description of those same experiences.

13. What roles did Samuel Adams and John Adams play in Washington's Boston visit? What were their positions in 1789? In 1776?

14. As a central public figure in momentous times, George Washington was aware that his papers, including his diaries, would one day be read. Did that awareness affect the tone or the content of this diary? What aspects of his personality, his experience, his perspectives, and his

goals are expressed in the diary? What subjects does Washington leave out of his diary entries? If you were a biographer of George Washington, or a historian writing about him, how would your awareness of these factors affect the way you used the diaries as primary sources?

15. As a young man Washington trained to be a surveyor; he became a soldier, a general, and president; and he was a farmer all his life (even keeping close tabs on his farm at Mount Vernon while he was president in New York and Philadelphia). How do you think all this informs his perspective as it is expressed in this diary?

16. How has this exercise changed your understanding of George Washington?