

Title: What People’s Stuff Can Tell You: *Looking at a Colonial Probate Record*

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| Author: Marti MacKenzie | Grade Level: 4 or 5 (Virginia Studies) |
| School: Daniel Morgan Middle School Winchester VA (a 5-8 school) | Time Estimated: 2 Blocks (85 minutes) Or 3 55-60 minute periods |

Brief Overview (1-2 sentence description): Students will work in partners to examine and discuss the primary source probate record inventory of goods belonging to Sarah Green (d. 1757) to improve comprehension of life in Colonial Virginia. After sharing with others, students will answer questions predicting what they think Sarah Green’s life was like. Students will listen to (or read a transcript from) an interview with a colonial historian and compare their predictions with the historian’s conclusions.

Brief Historical Background (4 to 5 sentences): By the eighteenth century, the colony of Virginia had grown into a society with distinctions between race, class, and gender. Like most southern colonies, Virginia had a slave-based, planter-dominated society. Even though only a relative few, about five percent, of southern white landowners were planters (with 20-plus slaves), they were the role models for other aspiring white men. Influenced by English law, men were the sole possessors of the family’s wealth, but women could be the beneficiaries of shared wealth upon the death of their husbands. *Legal documents, such as tax records or probate inventories, often provide our only information about the status of a woman and the lifestyles of ordinary people during the colonial and early national periods. Such listings of household possessions, from a time when household goods were not widely mass produced, can illuminate a fair amount about a person’s or a family’s routines, rituals, and social relations, as well as about a region’s economy and its connections to larger markets.*

Objectives: The students will:

- 1) Review a primary source document (Sarah Green, York County Wills and Inventories #20, 1745-1759, pp. 512-513) and discuss, predict, and infer information about the listed items.
- 2) Make conclusions based on their findings about Sarah Green and about life in colonial Virginia.
- 3) Compare their predictions and conclusions with those of a colonial historian.

Standards of Learning:

Skills:

VS.1 The student will develop skills for historical and geographical analysis including the ability to

- a) identify and interpret artifacts and primary and secondary source documents to understand events in history;

- b) determine cause and effect relationships;
- c) draw conclusions and make generalizations;
- h) evaluate and discuss issues orally and in writing.

Content:

VS.4 The student will demonstrate knowledge of life in the Virginia colony by

- a) explaining the importance of agriculture and its influence on the institution of slavery;
- d) describing how money, barter, and credit were used.

Materials (online primary sources, student reading, activity sheets, supplies):

- 1) Scratch paper and pencils.
- 2) Lesson objective or sign
- 3) Original copy and transcript of Sarah Green's probate inventory:
<http://gunstonhall.org/probate/GREEN59.PDF> (one each for each student)
- 4) Vocabulary words written on board, chart paper, or projected on SmartBoard
- 5) Partner activity questions written on board, chart paper, or projected on SmartBoard
- 6) Worksheet with columns for "What You Noticed", "Questions You Have", "Historical Background"(one per student -- attached).
- 7) Video version and selected transcript sections of Rosemarie Zaggarri interview. (one per student)
- 8) Venn Diagram for all for final assessment
- 9) (*Optional/extension*) Map of Gunston Hall or projection of Gunston Hall Plantation On-Line Tour: <http://gunstonhall.org/tour/welcome.html> .

Strategies:

DAY ONE

Hook (8-10 minutes)

(*Option 1*) Explain to students that today the lesson involves the things we can learn about people based on their possessions – the things they own – “What People’s Stuff Can Tell You” (this can be made into a sign or written as the day’s objective). Ask students to “brainstorm.” Give students two minutes to write down everything they own – their stuff. At the end of two minutes ask them to partner with someone (Clock Buddies, elbow partners, across the table, etc.) and share their lists. As they look at the other person’s list they should think about what the list tells them about the person; what questions they would have based on the list; and how the knowledge they have about the person already helps them understand the list. Give students two-three minutes to study their partner’s list. At the end of the time, discuss what they learned, questions, and background.

(Option 2) If available, bring in several items on the inventory list that would not be familiar to all students: pestle and mortar, Dutch Oven, Damask napkins, dog irons (andirons), etc. Pass them around, asking students to think about what the objects might have been used for 250 years ago. Share ideas in an open discussion. Explain to students that today the lesson involves the things we can learn about people based on their possessions – the things they own – “What People’s Stuff Can Tell You” (this can be made into a sign or written as the day’s objective). Ask what the items you passed around might tell them about the person who owned them.

1. Inventory analysis (10-12 minutes)

- Distribute the original inventory copy (or project it from <http://gunstonhall.org/probate/GREEN59.PDF>) and a copy of the transcript.
- Review the definition of a “primary source.”
- Explain they are to work with their partner to study the lists and note what they notice (or what the list tells them about the person) and questions they have.
- List suggested partner activity questions on board, chart pack, or Smartboard.
- Review SOME unusual/new vocabulary written on board, chart paper, or projected on SmartBoard. (Explain you want them to try to figure out some of the words; also some words are unknown. Include some definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary, particularly for words that have changed meaning over the years.)
- Distribute three-column worksheet (one per student)
- Give them eight-ten minutes to study the inventory and complete the first two columns of the worksheet.

2. Group Discussion (12-15 minutes)

Draw three columns on the board (or chart packs or SmartBoard): Headings: Notice, Questions, Historical Background. Ask students to share, and write on board:

- First, what do we already know about this time period in Virginia – mid 1700s? (list under Historical Background)
- What did you notice about the list/inventory (refer to activity questions)? (list under Notice)
- What questions do you have about the inventory and Sarah Green? (list under questions)

(Break here for block classes)

3. Extended activity (15-25 minutes: complete as homework for regular period classes)

Explain that students are now going to “do history” (working on their own). Historians take primary source information like this and make conclusions about people or a time in history.

- On back of worksheet, draw a line down the middle.
- Write “Actual” on the first column and “Conclusions” on the second.
- In the first column write what you know about Sarah Green. Draw conclusions from the information and write them in the second column. Use the information to make educated guesses when you can. (Model example: From the list I know she had slaves, so I’ll write “She had slaves.”)
- Explain that tomorrow we will hear from someone else who “does history”.

(Based on time, when finished students may share in small groups at which time they can add or make changes to their list.)

DAY TWO

HOOK (3-5 minutes)

(Option one) Remind students that the lesson the day before, “What People’s Stuff Can Tell You,” started with students making lists of “stuff” they own and then sharing with partners. Review some of the things partners learned by looking at another student’s list. *(Call on some who did not share on Day One)*

(Option two) Display a written list of “Stuff I Own.” It can be your stuff, your spouse’s stuff, or a list from someone in the class. Brainstorm what the list tells you about the person. Refer to Day One Activity Questions; explain students can use the information to make conclusions or inferences.

Give the day’s objective: to compare their conclusions about Sarah Green with that of a professional historian.

1. Student discussion: Student conclusions about Sarah Green (8-12 minutes)

- Students pick new partners.
- Ask students to share and **EXPLAIN** how they “Did History” -- the things on their Conclusions chart and why they included the information. Give them 3-5 minutes to share.
- Write on board, chart pack, or SmartBoard the majority of things students wrote on their Conclusions chart, letting students tell you about their partner’s list rather than their own.

2. Historian’s conclusions (35-40 minutes)

Summarize the interview with Dr. Rosemarie Zagari of George Mason University on Sarah Green’s probate record. Explain that she is a historian focusing on the colonial period of American history.

- Distribute copies of Questions 6 through 11 of the transcript of the interview with Dr. Rosemarie Zagari.
- Play Questions 6-11 of the interview with Dr. Zagari or read it aloud to students.
- Stop the video after Question 8 for review of slavery and agriculture (VS.4a) and after Question 9 for review of economic items (VS.4d).
- Review the interview, discussing key points that were the same (compare) or were different (contrast) from the students’ conclusions.

(Break here for block classes)

(DAY THREE FOR REGULAR PERIOD CLASSES – review to this point)

3. Compare and contrast (10-15 minutes)

- To assess student understanding, distribute Venn Diagram. Students label one circle “Just My Conclusions” and the other “Just Rosie’s Conclusions”. They label the center “We Agree”.
- They must enter at least 12 items. Each part of the diagram must have at least 2 items.
- Model possibilities: 4 items in each place; 6 “My Conclusions”; 2 “We Agree”, 4

“Rosie’s Conclusions”.

□ Differentiation: Students may draw pictures to represent their items and explain to you one-on-one.

3. **Extension** (10-15 minutes)

(*Option one*) Distribute the floor plan of Gunston Hall and explain, reviewing the importance of George Mason. Use the large entry as the “hall.” Students label where they would find some items from Sarah Green’s inventory if she lived there.

(*Option two*) Project the Virtual Tour of the Gunston Hall Plantation from the Gunston Hall Plantation website: <http://www.gunstonhall.org/tour/welcome.html>

4. **Closing** (3-5 minutes)

Either in small groups or as a class, have each student share, based on the lessons, “What People’s Stuff Can Tell You.”

Homework and/or Assessment:

Depending on time, work on “Conclusions” column of the chart can be finished at home after Day One. The “floor plan” extension option can be completed at home, also.

Assessment should be ongoing based on participation and progress on worksheet. Venn Diagram with “compare/contrast” activity is the culminating assessment.

Differentiation:

Special needs students should work with supportive partners; given assistance as needed with worksheet; allowed to draw items in final Venn Diagram assessment.

G&T students should be directed to the Gunston Hall website for exploration. They could complete a second worksheet using another of the Virginia probate inventories on the website.

Options can be given for the Venn Diagram assessment, possibly including:

- Write a short “historical fiction” book about Sarah Green’s life.
- Write a newspaper article describing the findings of the probate inventory.
- Draw a picture of Sarah Green and some of her possession.

References (annotated):

Barbara Clark Smith, "Analyzing an 1804 Inventory," *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/sia/inventory.htm>, February 2002. This is an excellent example of how to use an inventory as a teaching tool.

Gunston Hall Plantation Probate Inventory Databases, *Green59*, <http://gunstonhall.org/probate/GREEN59.PDF>. This is the actual copy of the inventory.

Gunston Hall Plantation House Tour, <http://gunstonhall.org/tour/welcome.html>. This on-line tour of George Mason's home is an excellent extension for the lesson or can be incorporated by showing the names of rooms.

Rosemarie Zagari, *Green Probate Transcript*. This discussion with George Mason University's expert on the colonial period answers questions and gives insight into the Green inventory.