

“A colonial woman speaks from the grave: who was Sarah Green and what is she trying to tell us?”

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School: Auburn Middle School	Time Estimated: three and one half class periods

Overview:

Students will use a probate record and supporting materials and sources to make assumptions or draw conclusions about life in colonial Virginia.

Historical Background:

In 1759, the American colonies were the battleground for a struggle between the two major European powers, France and Great Britain. Virginians, like other colonists, were greatly influenced by economic, political, social, and religious ties to England. The majority of Americans were farmers and Virginia’s tobacco economy had led to the development of a class of planters who utilized slave labor to support the economic activities of plantations. 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. The wealthy planter class of the South also served as a financial resource for individuals in the community who needed capital for business purposes in the absence of an incorporated banking system.

Objectives:

Students will use a probate record to gather information about the possessions of Sarah Green in order to make inquiries and interpretations about her life and the lives of other Virginians of the 18th-century planter class.

Students will use supporting materials and group discussions to engage in the practice of historical inquiry in order to learn skills necessary for historical research.

Students will use their research from a probate record to create a textbook entry and reflect upon the differences between primary and secondary source materials.

Standards of Learning:

U.S. I.1—the students will develop skills for historical analysis including the ability to analyze primary and secondary source documents in order to understand events and life in the United State before 1877, to make connections to the past from the present, to interpret ideas and events from different historical perspectives, and to discuss historical issues orally and in writing.

U.S. I.5—the student will demonstrate knowledge of the factors that shaped colonial America describing colonial life from the perspectives of large landowners, women, indentured servants, and slaves.

Materials:

1. Copies of *History Alive!: America's Past* or a similar textbook containing information about life in colonial America.
2. Anticipation Guide for probate record research (handout attached)
3. Answer key to Anticipation Guide (attached)
4. Political map of Virginia
5. Copies of Dr. Zagari transcript
6. Copies of Old English Dictionary translations of selected vocabulary
7. Copies of the transcription of Sarah Green's probate inventory
8. Questions to guide my research of the probate record (handout attached)
9. About Sarah Green and her possessions (handout attached)
10. Pencils, paper
11. Whiteboard and markers

Strategies:**Day one**

1. Tell students that they are about to investigate a mystery involving a woman who lived in Virginia over 200 years ago. She would like to tell us about herself, but, unfortunately, we have only her probate records to speak for her. We will learn what a probate record is tomorrow, so, for now, we will learn something about what is of value to us as modern Americans.
2. On a t-chart that they create on paper, ask students to list, on the left side of the chart, five things in their home that they value the most: these might be the things they would want to have if they could, for some reason, only take their five most valuable possessions with them to a new home. Remind them that entertainment value is not the only criteria they should consider: e.g., they need to have somewhere to sleep, they probably want to eat prepared food, they may need a change of clothes, and they probably don't want to walk everywhere that they need to go. Then have them give a reason for selecting each valuable item on the right side of their chart. After students have prepared their lists, have them share their answers with a partner. Select students to share some of their answers and write them on the board, with their reasons for selection. Summarize by stating that certain items present in our households are considered more valuable because of their usefulness, uniqueness, or expense in acquiring.
3. Prompt students to ask their parents to do this same exercise and to discuss their answers with the student. Cue students to bring their parents' lists with explanations to class the next day.

Day two

1. Have students work in groups of four to make a list of the most important items in

their households, based on the lists made by themselves and their parents. Instruct students to write down all of the items on their lists and to discuss how to order them from most to least valuable. Because there may be different criteria, such as cost or utility, which make items more or less valuable, and because individuals value items differently, there may be disagreement about how to order items. Groups should do their best to make an ordered list, based on reasons given for valuing the items in question.

2. Have a class discussion in which you list items which you can add to the list made on the previous day.

3. Now ask students to discuss what these items might tell us about modern Americans and their lives, their homes, their families, their jobs, or their money.

4. After discussing what these household inventories tell us about ourselves as modern Americans, tell the class that they will be uncovering or interpreting what colonial life may have been like for a woman who lived in York County, Virginia. Show York County on a wall map. Point out its proximity to Williamsburg and to Jamestown, and have students recall earlier learning about these two historic sites. Students may want to consult *History Alive!* or another text. The textbook also has brief sections about the education of girls in dame schools and about slave life on a plantation outside of Williamsburg. This information is useful background knowledge for the analysis of Sarah Green's estate.

5. Pass out the anticipation guide and tell students that we are about to embark on our investigation, but first we are going to test our knowledge about some key concepts related to colonial life that the textbook has not discussed. Have students complete the anticipation guide, then go over the answers and explanations from the answer key. Ask students to discuss with a partner anything that they found surprising or interesting about the anticipation guide questions.

6. Prompt students to anticipate what Sarah Green may have possessed if she lived in Virginia until her death in 1757. Ask for some conjectures, then summarize some of the key points from the anticipation guide.

7. Prior to the next lesson, the teacher should read the transcript of the interview with Dr. Rosemarie Zagari to obtain pertinent background information about the use of probate records in historical research.

Day Three

1. Pass out copies of the first page of the interview transcript with Dr. Zagari to each student and read Question 1, or show the video for Question 1. Emphasize that probate records allowed people to inherit property from relatives or to collect debts

owed to them. By studying a probate record, historians can learn how wealthy or poor the person was based on what and how much they owned.

2. Utilizing the groups of four formed during Day Two, pass out the probate record of Sarah Green to each individual. Tell students that we must uncover as much about the life of Sarah Green (and perhaps the colonists in York County) as we can using just her probate record. Have students make observations about what they see on the document (it is a list, there are numbers next to list items, items are listed under room names, there are abbreviations, etc.). Discourage students from drawing any conclusions or making inferences at this point.

3. Ask students to identify words, numbers, abbreviations, or other aspects of the record which they find confusing. Emphasize to students that they need not understand everything in the document in order to make use of it. Make sure that print or online dictionaries are available. Pass out copies of translations from the Old English Dictionary. Discuss the fact that word meanings change over time and that some words disappear from popular use altogether.

4. Pass out copies of the handouts entitled “questions to guide my research of the probate record” and “about Sarah Green and her possessions.” Identify that the questions are guiding questions which may be useful to each group as they look for facts or attempt to draw conclusions about the record. The questions do not have to be answered in the same manner that students would answer comprehension questions at the end of a chapter in a textbook.

5. Teach students how to use the three handouts by using a Think Aloud technique. For example, “I am looking at the two page list and it says that it is an inventory. My dictionary says that an inventory is an itemized list of goods or property. It says that they are from the estate of Sarah Green. There are several definitions of estate in my dictionary, but I am guessing that these are the possessions of a dead person because there are several dates from the years 1757 and 1759. On my “about Sarah Green’s possessions” handout, I am going to write that I am certain that this is a list of Sarah Green’s possessions. I will write that in the “I am certain” column. Then I will write that I think she died in 1757 or 1759 in the “I am assuming” column and give my reasoning that it says that something was ordered, taken, and entered on three dates during those years. I think that she probably died in April 1757 because she had to die before someone would order her possessions to be inventoried. In the questions column of my handout, I will write that I don’t know what caused her death.”

6. Prompt students to work in pairs so that they discuss their ideas while they fill out their handouts. Remind them that facts are ideas about which they are certain, while assumptions require making reasoned judgments, and that it is good to have

questions because curiosity is the sign of a good historian. Remind them to not focus on trying to understand every detail, but to use their dictionaries or textbook to the extent that they are helpful. Circulate among the groups of students to offer assistance.

7. If students are having difficulty determining the relative values of objects, give the class a mini-lesson on place values, emphasizing that you don't have to know what dollars and cents are to know that larger digits in left hand columns denote higher values than those placed farther to the right.

8. When student pairs have begun to fill out their handouts recording their assessment of facts, assumptions, and questions, prompt them to share their work with the other student pair in their group of four. Encourage students to question each others' assumptions, challenge statements of fact, or attempt to answer the other pairs' questions. Circulate to hear discussions and make anecdotal records of ideas promoted by different student pairs to help in the large group discussion to ensue.

9. Engage the class in a discussion of their findings. Use a whiteboard and marker to record facts and assumptions with which a consensus of the class can agree. Encourage discussion between student groups who disagree and attempt to come to a resolution. If none can be made, make the disagreement into a question for further study. Record students' questions about the record and discuss how other records might be consulted in order to attempt to answer those questions.

10. Summarize the class's findings about the estate and life of Sarah Green and her possessions.

11. Select sections from Dr. Zagari's transcript to help illuminate concepts that were difficult for students in their research. For example, ideas about her daily life, the ownership of slaves, unusual possessions, or the role of women can be extended by reference to ideas in the transcript as taught in a short mini-lesson.

Day Four

1. Ask students to reread the sections of their textbook about colonial life in America. Prompt them to have their handout about Sarah Green and her possessions for reference while they read.

2. Write this question on the board: what has your research on Sarah Green taught you about life in colonial Virginia that your textbook failed to mention? Prompt students not to think in terms of specific details about Sarah Green as much as in general statements that might apply to colonial Americans as a group. Have a

brief discussion of the value of the probate record research in extending the narrative of the textbook.

3. Write this sentence on the board: studying probate records, like those of Sarah Green, who died in 1757, can reveal much about life in colonial America. Prompt students that this is the topic sentence for a textbook entry that they are to write. Encourage students to brainstorm, then to organize their ideas from their inquiry in order to write a 6-10 sentence entry. Let them know that their entries will be assessed for historical accuracy, effective use of the probate record, and clarity of communication. Help students work on their entries, then assign as homework.

Assessment

Use a rubric to assess the textbook entries. Give primary weight (80%) to effective use of the probate record for the purpose of historical inquiry while maintaining historical accuracy, and give the remaining 20% for quality of communication. A proficient performance might include work that draws historically accurate inferences with specific references to the probate record, integrating background information contained in the anticipation guide, the textbook, or other reference materials. Exceptional communication will be recognized by composition, organization of ideas and good mechanics and usage.

Differentiation

Non-linguistic learners may need support to visualize the record. Providing a handout which illustrates the floor plan of a two-story Georgian house may be effective in this regard. It may also be helpful to these students to offer them an alternative work product for assessment: instead of writing the textbook entry, you may offer these students the option of drawing a floor plan of Sarah Green's house as they envision it, with items from the inventory as they might have appeared to the appraisers. This diagram would have to be assessed for neatness and should be captioned so that its usefulness for historical inquiry and accuracy can be assessed.