



Teaching Probate Inventories

[Home](#) [Interpreting](#) [Browse](#) [Search](#) [Teaching](#) [About](#)

✦ [Elementary School](#)

✦ [Middle School](#)

✦ [High School](#)

Teaching Probate Records: Lesson Plans

Plantation Life in 18th-century Virginia: Building a Picture of the Past through Probate Records

Author: Michael McKenna

School: Culpeper County High School

Grade Level: 11

Time Estimated: One Block (90 minutes)

[print the lesson plan \(.pdf\)](#)

Brief Overview

Utilizing a probate record, and what they have already learned about colonial Virginia, the students will attempt to describe life on an 18th-century Virginia plantation.

Brief Historical Background

From the early Colonial era to the end of the Civil War the plantation has been viewed as the cornerstone of the Southern economy. Relying heavily upon slave labor, wealthy landowners grew cash crops such as rice, tobacco, indigo and cotton for export. One such land owner was Moore Fautleroy of Richmond County, Virginia. Upon his death in 1791 his estate was inventoried for probate. This inventory provides a unique insight into the life of a wealthy Southern landowner of Virginia in the early republic.

Objectives

1. Demonstrate effective analysis of a primary source.
2. Demonstrate an understanding of some of the social and economic conditions of 18th-century Virginia.
3. Compare and contrast the information contained in the primary source with what they have already learned.
4. Apply conceptual information found in the primary source to create their own visual representation of the house.

5. Demonstrate an ability to effectively work with others.

Standards of Learning

Skills:

VUS.1 The student will demonstrate skills for historical and geographical analysis, including the ability to:

1. identify, analyze, and interpret primary and secondary source documents, records, and data, including artifacts, diaries, letters, photographs, journals, newspapers, historical accounts, and art to increase understanding of events and life in the United States;
2. formulate historical questions and defend findings based on inquiry and interpretation; and
3. communicate findings orally and in analytical essays and/or comprehensive papers

Content:

VUS.3 The student will describe how the values and institutions of European economic life took root in the colonies and how slavery reshaped European and African life in the Americas.

1. Virginia and the other Southern colonies developed economies in the eastern coastal lowlands based on large plantations that grew “cash crops” such as tobacco, rice, and indigo for export to Europe.
2. Virginia and the Southern colonies had a social structure based on family status and the ownership of land.
3. Most plantation labor needs eventually came to be filled by the forcible importation of Africans. While some Africans worked as indentured servants, earned their freedom, and lived as free citizens during the Colonial Era, over time larger and larger numbers of enslaved Africans were forcibly brought to the Southern colonies (the “Middle Passage”).

Materials

(Downloads are in .pdf format)

1. Three to four empty microwave dinner boxes
2. Colored pencils
3. Copies of [Barbara Clark Smith's interview](#) regarding Moore Fauntleroy's probate record
4. A classroom set of copies of the [probate record of Moore Fauntleroy](#)
5. Copies of the accompanying worksheet, [The Probate Record of Moore Fauntleroy](#)
6. [Answer guide to the worksheet](#)

Strategies

The Hook (10 minutes):

We have already gone over the use of primary sources and artifacts in doing historical research. Now is a chance to actually use them. Breaking the class into small groups, I give each group an empty microwave dinner box. Just from looking at the box, each group will try to describe as much as they can about the person who left this behind.

I usually use a sausage and pepperoni pizza box. These are some of things that students have been able to tell me:

- The person had access to electricity, refrigeration and microwave or stove.
- Probably did not grow their own food.
- Probably ate alone and in a hurry.
- Understood English.
- Was not too health conscious.
- Was probably male (Too many calories for a female)
- Was not a vegetarian, Jewish or Hindu Religion (pork, beef-dairy combination).
- Was not wealthy.

Brief Lecture and Class Discussion (10 minutes):

I explain to the class that historians can tell a lot from what people leave behind. One example is a person's will. In the 18th-century, wealth was often in the form of personal possessions.

When a wealthy individual died, the process for settling the estate often included taking a probate inventory. The inventory listed the personal and chattel property in the possession of the deceased at the time of death. It was used, after settling accounts with creditors and debtors, to divide the estate among the heirs.

After distributing copies of the probate record, let students examine the inventory. Provide some guiding questions to get the students thinking like historical detectives and initiate class discussion.

Possible guiding questions:

- In what part of the country did this person live and how do you know? (The document lists the Richmond County court. The long list of slaves provides a clue that Moore Fautleroy lived in the South.)
- What did he do for a living? How wealthy was this person? (The length of the inventory and the type of items on the list should indicate that he was a relatively wealthy plantation owner.)

Then provide some background about the time and place. but try not to provide all of the information immediately.

Small Group Work (20 minutes):

Working in groups the students will complete the assigned worksheet. (For this activity I would try to include students of varying abilities in each group and have at least one exceptionally strong student.) The teacher will explain that the object of this activity is to see how much we can tell about life on this plantation by just using a list of what the owner left behind upon his death. The teacher will provide assistance deciphering the inventory. One such inventory entry that needs explanation is "do" which is short for "ditto," or "the same as the item above." (This is where the transcript will come in handy.) After about 20 minutes or so the students should be prepared to share their findings with the rest of the class.

Class Discussion (15 minutes):

The teacher will lead a class discussion as each group offers their answers to the worksheet.

Individual Work (25 minutes):

Using the record as a point of reference, the students will attempt to draw a floor plan of the main house on the back of the worksheet. The record gives very clear clues on how many rooms there were and where they were located.

There are some terms that the teacher should explain to aid the students. (See [Barbara Clark Smith's interview](#) or [play excerpts of the interview](#) to the class.) In the 1700s a passageway is what we could call a hallway today and a hall referred to an actual room. Sometimes a closet was not a closet: sometimes it was a small area to store things, but sometimes it could be a small room. Take a look at how much stuff is in a closet to help you decide if it is a room or just a small space. The teacher could model that the easiest way to draw the plan is to create two separate floor plans. To save time the students do not need to include every cupboard etc. The teacher, however, can encourage students to include additional items using guided clues. Which rooms had fireplaces? Which room might have been the master bedroom? Where would the vegetable garden have been located? The front door?

Closure (10 minutes):

Two hundred years from now an historian might find an inventory of a 21st century doctor or lawyer. What items would be on the list?

Assessment

In addition to a class participation grade, students will also be assessed through a short answer essay question on their next test.

In what ways did Moore Fauntleroy's estate appear to be a typical Southern plantation and in what ways was it different?

In many ways the Fauntleroy estate is an example of what the students have been repeatedly been taught about Southern plantations (large estates, slave labor, and part of a well cultured society). On the other hand, while the SOL repeatedly mentions cash crops such as tobacco, indigo, rice, and King Cotton, they were not the main economic activities on this particular plantation. Higher ended learners might recognize that (besides soil factors) one reason for the apparent lack of cotton growing was that this record was created two years before Eli Whitney developed his version of the cotton gin.

Differentiation

Through lecture, discussion, guided practice, and creating a floor plan this lesson plan attempts to address most learning styles. Both the teacher-led questions and those on the worksheet are aimed at both high and low ended learners.