

PROJECT TITLE: Artifacts from George Washington’s Study and Thomas Jefferson’s Cabinet: What is in the World is that doing here?

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SUBJECT & GRADE LEVEL: American History/3rd Grade

SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

What can we learn about George Washington and Thomas Jefferson by examining the personal belongings in their studies? What do these items tell us about their interests, their personal characteristics, and the roles they played in American history?

George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were visionary leaders who were instrumental in transforming Virginia and the other colonies into an independent nation. By leading the effort to create the United States of America, Washington and Jefferson secured an iconic place in both American history and world history.¹ Although these founding fathers lived over two hundred years ago, we are still able to catch a glimpse into their personal lives by visiting their homes, Jefferson’s Monticello and Washington’s Mount Vernon, which have

¹ The lives of Washington and Jefferson have, of course, been well documented, and the significance of their contributions to the creation of the United States is beyond debate. For compelling histories of the lives of these men, see Flexner, J. (1974). *Washington: The Indispensable Man*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co.; Henriques, P. (2006). *Realistic Visionary: A Portrait of George Washington*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press; and Malone, D. (1948-81). *Jefferson and His Time*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co.

been largely preserved as they existed during their lifetimes.² These homes contain many original furnishings and personal possessions that allow us to gain insight into each man's background and personal interests. Moreover, because many of these items came from Europe and other locations outside the United States, their presence in the homes of these American leaders provides a compelling lesson in how dependent the Americans were on foreign goods at the time of the birth of the nation.

In particular, Washington's study at Mount Vernon and Jefferson's "cabinet" at Monticello contain fascinating collections of personal belongings that provide a window into what was important to these men.³ In these two studies, we can view items which each man used in his daily work or which he displayed as reminders of the important people, events, and periods in his life. By exploring these items we are able to uncover evidence about both historical figures, with regard to their personalities, their values, and their pursuits. In addition, an examination of the collections of personal items in the respective studies allows us to see both similarities and differences between the two men. Importantly, this exploration enables us to see Washington and Jefferson not only as statues, paintings or historical icons, but as the real flesh and blood men that they were.

For example, in Washington's study, we can see his book press, a cabinet that contained over 900 volumes at the time of his death. The wide variety of books in the book

² The preserved homes at Monticello and Mount Vernon may be seen at the official websites for these sites. See <http://www.monticello.org> and <http://www.mountvernon.org>.

³ Items in the study at Mount Vernon may be seen at <http://www.mountvernon.org/virtual/vrtour.html>. The contents of Jefferson's cabinet are on view at <http://www.monticello.org/gallery/house/interior/cabinet.html>.

press, a great many of which came from other countries, shows his interest in a great range of subjects, including military strategy, farming, and literature. In addition, the study contains a globe that he obtained from England four months after he became President; when ordering it he asked the London globe maker "to send me by the first vessel, which sails for New York, a terrestrial globe of the largest dimensions and of the most accurate and approved kind now in use."⁴ The globe exemplifies Washington's understanding that the United States was to be involved in international matters, and also shows the fact that even as the United States become independent from England, it was still dependent on England for high-quality specialty items that no one in the United States was making at that time. Washington's position in government and society, and his role as a respected businessman/farmer, required that he keep meticulous records and maintain correspondence with a great number of people. This aspect of his life is shown by several items: his wax jack on his desk (used for sealing letters), his letter press (which functioned as a primitive copier), and his writing desk.

Washington's military background can be seen by his sword that he displayed in his study and by the many books on military matters that he retained in his collection of books. Washington's awareness of his status—earned both by his military leadership and his terms as President—is clearly indicated by the Houdon bust of Washington and by the plaster profile of his likeness done in the style of Caesar.

⁴ Letter to Wakelin, Welch & Son, August 16, 1789. From *The Writings of George Washington*, United States Government Printing Office 1939, vol. 30.

Washington's interest in science and technology is evidenced not only by his books but also by the telescope in his study, which he used both to watch for ships on the Potomac and to examine the stars in the night sky. His interest in the latest gadgets is demonstrated by the fan chair, which uses a floor pedal to operate a fan that sits over the top of the chair, and by the letter press mentioned above.

Jefferson called his study his "cabinet," and the cabinet at Monticello is full of interesting objects that teach us about Jefferson.⁵ For example, Jefferson is known for maintaining voluminous correspondence and keeping meticulous records, and this is shown by his "polygraph" device,⁶ an invention that made almost exact copies of whatever he wrote as he wrote it. The cabinet also has a set of Jefferson's ivory note cards, which he would carry with him wherever he went for taking notes. Jefferson, like Washington, had a love of technology and gadgets. His polygraph was just one example. He also had a revolving bookstand that could hold up to five books, probably made at Monticello in accordance with Jefferson's own design, and had both a revolving chair and his desk with a revolving top.

His interest in science and technology is also shown by his achromatic telescope, which was made in London, and by the astronomical case clock that he had made for himself. Jefferson's passion for agriculture is shown by his thermometer (he checked and recorded the temperature every morning and evening and encouraged others to do so) as well as by his seed press. Jefferson's drawing desk reflects his interest in architecture and also is evidence

⁵ A good source of information about items in Jefferson's cabinet is Stein, S. (1993). *The Worlds of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers.

⁶ What Jefferson called a "polygraph" has no relation to the lie-detecting device that currently carries that name.

of his time spent in Paris, as he purchased it when he was an envoy to the French court.

Jefferson's skill at architecture is revealed from the drawings and plans on display, including those that he designed for the construction of the University of Virginia.

Jefferson, like Washington, had a sense of his place in history. Accordingly, he had three busts in his study: Washington, Adams, and Madison, all important players in America's quest to form a new nation. The bust of Adams also evokes the rivalry and later long friendship that Jefferson was known to have with Adams.

Elementary students can relate to the idea that people save and display items that are important to them. Showing these items to young students, either in person on a field trip or through digital photographs, is a way of teaching them how to interpret history and analyze historical figures. Looking at where these items came from is also a way of showing students that early America was economically connected to, and interdependent with, the larger, global community.

Annotated Bibliography:

Books:

Adams, W. (1983). *Jefferson's Monticello*. New York, NY: Abbeville Press.

This well-illustrated book takes a chronological look at the construction of Monticello and provides detailed explanation of how Jefferson's travels in Europe influenced his ideas for the design of Monticello. The book explains the origin of the items that Jefferson used in his study, and provides context with regard to how he came to acquire them.

Dalzell, R. & Dalzell, L. (1998). *George Washington's Mount Vernon*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

This book provides a comprehensive account of George Washington's life at Mount Vernon, including Washington's enlargement of the house during his lifetime. The book is helpful because it gives considerable political and social detail regarding Washington's life and ties it to Mount Vernon.

Flexner, J. (1974). *Washington: The Indispensable Man*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co.

This interesting biography of Washington is Flexner's distillation of his four-volume *George Washington*, which won a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award.

Henriques, P. (2006). *Realistic Visionary: A Portrait of George Washington*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.

This book is a detailed history of the life of George Washington, and does not particularly focus on Mount Vernon. It is helpful in providing rich background material with regard to all phases of Washington's life.

Malone, D. (1948-81). *Jefferson and His Time*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co.

This six-volume history of Jefferson's entire life was the life's work of Dumas Malone and contains practically every detail known about Jefferson. Malone was a devoted admirer of Jefferson.

McLaughlin, J. (1988). *Jefferson and Monticello: The Biography of a Builder*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company.

A history of both Jefferson's life and of Monticello, this book contains a lot of primary materials such as Jefferson's sketches and architectural drawings. The book does a good job of explaining and exploring the influences on Jefferson's architectural work.

Stein, S. (1993). *The Worlds of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers.

This book was perhaps the most important resource for identifying and describing the objects in Jefferson's cabinet. It contains photographs of almost all of the items covered in this project and explains where they came from and when Jefferson obtained them.

Web sites:

George Washington's Mount Vernon, Estate and Gardens. Discover Mount Vernon's Top Treasures. Retrieved March 21-27, 2010, from <http://emuseum.mountvernon.org/code/emuseum.asp>.

This is the official web site of Mount Vernon, which is invaluable for researching the objects and belongings in the house. This page provides photographs and descriptions of all of the objects including in the project.

George Washington's Mount Vernon, Estate and Gardens. The Mount Vernon Virtual Mansion Tour. Retrieved March 21-27, 2010, from <http://www.mountvernon.org/virtual/vrtour.html>.

This page, also from the official Mount Vernon web site, takes the viewer on a virtual tour of the house, including the study. On the page as the study is shown, there are photographs with links to larger photographs and descriptions of the objects in the study.

Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. Monticello Image Galleries: Jefferson's Cabinet. Retrieved March 21-27, 2010, from <http://www.monticello.org/gallery/house/interior/cabinet.html>.

This website page is from the official Monticello website, and it contains a gallery of photographs of all of the items in Jefferson's cabinet. It also describes the items and gives the source from which Jefferson obtained them.

Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. Explore Monticello. Virtual Tour. Retrieved March 21-27, 2010 from <http://explorer.monticello.org/index.html>.

This web site page is also from the official Monticello web site, and consists of a virtual tour of the house, which helps one put the rooms into perspective and gives one a greater understanding of the architecture of the house.