

PROJECT TITLE: **Shopping During and After the American Revolution**

AUTHOR:

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SUBJECT & GRADE LEVEL

Social Studies Second Grade

SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. **Primary Investigative Question(s)** – What was shopping like during/after the American Revolution?

Contextual Essay –

Shopping has changed in many ways with the times. You can now shop online with a credit card and have your products sent directly to your home within twenty-four hours. Shopping was not this convenient, fast, or simple for George Washington and other consumers during the American Revolution, but in many aspects the activity was similar. People have and will always enjoy shopping because it is a way to show individuality through possessions, and it can be a fun and entertaining activity to pass time. Consumer goods were and still are “topics of conversation, the source of a new vocabulary, [and] the spark of a new kind of social discourse” (Breen pg. 496).

Before the American Revolution, farmers like George Washington tried to have self-sufficient farms. However “the self-sufficient farm rarely, if ever, existed in early America, and everyday life was from the beginning tied to the work beyond the farm” (Hawke, pg. 153). At that historic time, there were not many stores. Planters in the south would have a makeshift store in their home or take their products to the market. There was usually a market in walking distance from everyone in the town. Shopping during this time might be at a port market or take place at a farmer’s home. Farmers would use a room in their house to place goods around for sale. People would travel to the markets to barter for the items, which could not be produced on their property. There were craftsmen in towns that would make leather gloves, jackets, wheelwrights, carts, wagons, furniture, and candles. Men of different trades would work together to create

boats or ships.

Shopping continued to evolve during the period leading up to the American Revolution. It is interesting to note how “each succeeding generation of colonial American farmers possessed more British imports than their fathers had” (Breen, pg. 485). Imported goods were advertised in local newspapers and journals. Stores began to sprout across the colonies, and the colonists “demanded consumer goods” (Breen, pg. 486). The stores in America during this time were “probably small, no larger than a garage in a home today” (Breen, pg. 492). They carried a wide variety of goods. As time passed, the stores grew larger and had shelves to display merchandise. These stores were spread throughout America and stayed open all year, unlike the markets during the first half of the 17th century (Hawke). Colonists would pay their mother country for the imported goods with tobacco, rice, indigo, wheat, fish, tar, and anything else England may need or want. Just as many people feel today, those colonial consumers felt they were taxed too heavily for personal acquisitions, a dilemma which played a large role in beginning the American Revolution.

At first, only well-to-do Americans could afford the genuine China and silver from Europe, and the poorer Americans would have imitation products. This trend is also present in modern-day America, as the introduction of counterfeit goods has swarmed the market. In colonial America, this did not last long, because as Americans became wealthier they purchased the authentic higher-quality products. There were many goods like teacups and cloth that America could not produce with the same quality or as affordable as Europe. Products from Europe were usually brighter and more colorful than products that were produced in America because of the resources and technology available. This issue of varying levels of quality being produced in America versus overseas is still present today with everything from handbags to automobiles to clothing. Upon becoming an independent Nation Americans faced a similar dilemma, “to buy American or buy Abroad?”

After being unanimously elected President, George Washington sought to support America’s fledgling industries and “buy American.” This is perhaps, best exemplified at his first inauguration in 1789 when he wore, “homespun broad cloth, of the Hartford fabric.” (Siegel, p. 26). Buying American all of the

time would prove easier said than done. There were many American-produced items that were of poorer quality than those shipped from European designers. Washington faced the same dilemma as many modern-day shoppers face: support American producers versus opting for what may be higher quality and/or lower prices by shopping abroad. For example Washington had to purchase a globe from Europe. The technology for a state of the art globe was not yet available in America. George Washington had his dining room chairs manufactured in America, but he could not get the brightly colored fabric he wanted in America so he had it sent from Europe and then Martha embroidered the fabric to create one of a kind designs.

Shopping has come a long way since the revolution, but so much of it has remained the same. The main goal for colonists and George Washington was to find possessions that they liked and showed their own individuality with the best quality for the best price, just as is the case with consumers today. Compared to shopping during colonial times, the shopping methods that we use today may have changed, but the reasons for the activity and the dilemmas we face have not.

Annotated Bibliography –

Breen, T. H. (1986). An Empire of Goods: The Anglicization of Colonial America, 1690-1776 [Abstract]. *The Journal Of British Studies*, 25(4), 467-499. Retrieved March 4, 2010, from JSTOR.

This Article shows what shopping and stores were like in Early America. It tells what types of things were available in America from Britain and how they were obtained. The article discusses in detail the types of goods that were manufactured in Britain specifically the amount of fine detail that was put into their products compared to the Americans who were more concerned about efficiency.

Chapter 11: Beyond the Farm. (1988). In D. F. Hawke (Author), *Everyday life in early America* (pp. 143-156). New York: Harper & Row.

This chapter explores wood and water, travel, the meetinghouse, and port towns, in early America. It has many quotes from primary sources on living in early America. The article explains how communities looked in early America; everything was in walking distance from each other. There was a port or store located in almost every community so all people had access to buying goods since there were very few self sufficient farms.

George Washington's Mount Vernon - Collections. (n.d.). Retrieved March 14, 2010, from <http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/collections/index.cfm/>

This website shows pieces that were owned by George Washington and are at Mount Vernon. Each object

can be clicked on for more detailed information like where it came from, who made it, where it was made, and what Washington used it for.

George Washington's Mount Vernon - Explore Mount Vernon. (n.d.). Retrieved March 14, 2010, from http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/explore_mv/index.cfm/

Imagining a World without Tea and Sugar: Teaching Strategies for America, The Atlantic, and Global Consumer Demand, 1500-1800. (2008). In G. W. Reichard & T. Dickson (Authors), *America on the world stage: a global approach to U.S. history* (pp. 12-16). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

This chapter shows how America was tied to Britain. This chapter sheds light on how much America really relied on Britain and how life would have been like if it were not for the trade that happened between the countries. It can help teachers create discussions or lectures on this topic.

Larkin, J. (1989). *The Reshaping of everyday life, 1790-1840*. New York: Harper & Row.

This book focuses on the changes of everyday life in America when the republic is formed and George Washington becomes president. The book shows the close relationship between economic life and social life.

Siegel, Brian. The Iconic George Washington and His Sense of Style. *George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens*, 1-30. Retrieved March 28, 2010, from <http://www.mountvernon.org/files/Siegel.pdf>.

This article goes into detail about George Washington's clothes and his role as a fashion icon. This article will tell you what George Washington's clothes were made out of, who made them, why he bought them, and where he bought them.