

SORTING THROUGH COLONIAL LIFE

LEVEL

Elementary

GUIDING QUESTION

What was everyday life like in colonial Virginia?

VIRGINIA STANDARDS AND HISTORICAL SKILLS

SOL: VS4e

Analyzing primary and secondary sources; comparing and contrasting; organizing information

LESSON OVERVIEW

Berkeley Plantation is one of Virginia's most historic plantations, located on the James River in Charles City, Virginia. The site's history began in 1619, when settlers observed the first official Thanksgiving in English North America. In addition to Virginia Thanksgiving, Berkeley Plantation offers a unique study of colonial life and culture in the eighteenth century. In this lesson, students will learn about colonial life through 12 images from Berkeley Plantation. They will analyze the images in small groups by sorting them in four different ways. This lesson could be done with all groups working at once, or as a 20- to 25-minute station rotation.

MATERIALS AND PREPARATION

- [A set of colonial life cards](#) for each group, cut into pieces. (Colored copies on white cardstock are ideal, but black and white images will suffice. The cards may be printed on both sides to save paper.)
- [Background information on each card](#)
- [Student Worksheet: Group Recording Sheet](#) (one per group)
- [Suggested responses](#)
- "Guardians of Jamestown, 1619" video clip: ["The First English Thanksgiving"](#)

PROCEDURE

Warm up/Staging the Question

1. Watch [“The First English Thanksgiving”](#) video clip.
2. Explain to students that Berkeley Hundred was first an economic venture like Jamestown. By the 1700s, it became a plantation. A plantation was a large farm owned by a wealthy family. Like many Virginia plantations, Berkeley Plantation used slave labor to grow tobacco. In the video, Safiri notices that the book clasp can help tell the story of Thanksgiving at Berkeley. Today you’ll be looking at 12 more images from Berkeley that can help tell the story of what colonial life was like in Virginia.

Main Activity

Note: Maximize student engagement and discussion by doing this activity in small groups of 2 to 4 students.

1. Divide students into groups, and explain that they will sort the same [12 images](#) in four different ways. Instruct students to read all the information on each sorting card, then to place each image under the column where it fits best. (You may wish to give students [more information](#) to inform their responses.)
2. Students should record their group’s responses on the [group recording sheet](#).
3. After all groups have finished, spend 10 to 15 minutes discussing the sorts as a whole group. Focus on the highlighted card numbers on the teacher page of [suggested responses](#). Expect that answers will vary, but look for students to be able to justify their thinking.

Extension Activity

Students can research, write, or draw additional images to add to the sorts.

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

All images appear courtesy of Berkeley Plantation. Images photographed and edited by Julia Davis, July 2017.

- 1. Names and values of Berkeley slaves:** All 110 of the enslaved people at Berkeley were inventoried and appraised upon the death of plantation owner Benjamin Harrison V in 1791. Despite wanting to distance ourselves from all things British, the values are still listed in British pounds. The continental dollar printed by Congress during the Revolutionary War was worthless due to inflation, and the federal bank had just been founded in 1791. The value of an enslaved person was determined by the anticipated level of service they could provide minus the cost it would take to maintain them (i.e. food, clothing). From the 7 slaves selected, you can see that younger adult males had the highest value, especially if they were skilled in a trade. Females of childbearing age were the second most valuable.
- 2. Cotton plant, fruit, and seeds:** In the colonial era, it was usually more economical to import fabric than to produce it on your own. Wool and linen could be imported cheaply from England, while fine cotton and silk were imported from India and worn by middle and upper class. Women sewed clothing for their households using mainly imported fabrics, while wealthier families would hire a tailor or seamstress to sew their clothing. Cotton was very labor intensive, and American spinning and weaving methods could produce only a coarse fabric in the 1700s. Our impending war against our #1 supplier of textiles is what fueled the demand for homespun fabrics in the 1770s. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 (VS6c) will spur the nineteenth century cotton industry that greatly expands the demand for slaves in the deep south.
- 3. The remains of a 1700s slave cabin meal:** Like most plantations, only the structural foundations of the slave cabins remain at Berkeley. The items in this image were found buried together in a pile and would have been considered a hearty meal for an enslaved family. Most slaves supplemented the meals their masters provided through hunting vermin and maintaining their own garden.
- 4. Silver tea urn, 1760s:** The perfect symmetry of this tea urn was characteristic of the Georgian style of furnishings and architecture that were prevalent on both sides of the Atlantic. (“Georgian” refers to the three King Georges of this era). After the Boston Tea Party in 1773, drinking tea became a political statement that showed you were loyal to the crown. Benjamin Harrison V was a Patriot who signed the Declaration of Independence, so he and his family at Berkeley would have switched over to coffee.
- 5. “The First Thanksgiving” 1981, oil on canvas by Sydney E. King:** The sketches and paintings of artist Sydney E. King are found in textbooks and museums throughout America. The National Park Service commissioned him to create over 200 images for the 350th anniversary of Jamestown. He also painted a series depicting life at Berkeley. King did extensive research for each of his paintings, striving for historical accuracy.

6. **Berkeley Plantation Manor, built in 1726:** The manor is the first three story home built in Virginia and was designed to show off the Harrison's wealth. Using multiple colors of bricks was particularly expensive because each type of clay had to be fired at a different temperature. The home has a rich history. Benedict Arnold burned all the original furnishings of the home in 1781 to punish Harrison for the treason of signing the Declaration of Independence. In 1842, the bank repossessed the land, as tobacco farming had completely depleted the soil and the Harrisons were deeply in debt. The home was next used as Union army headquarters in 1862, where military "Taps" was first played.
7. **Slave prepares master's meal, painted in 1980s by Sydney E. King:** This is a cropped portion of the painting. Fish, two rabbits, a rooster, various fruits, and a salad are shown in this image. The rest of the painting depicts the plantation mistress supervising with two additional house slaves and includes beans, corn, apples, tea, and stew.
8. **Letter from the Virginia Company Leaders, September 14, 1619:** The investors in the Berkeley settlement wrote [this letter of instructions to the Berkeley colonists](#). This letter also included the ordinance that the day of their arrival be observed annually as a holy day for thanksgiving and prayer.
9. **Clay brick with pig's hoofprint, 1720s:** The manor home took 3 years to complete, with all the bricks being made on site. The pigs got out while one of the batches was drying in the sun, and one left its print in this brick.
10. **Spinning wheel, 1700s:** This early spinning wheel is known as a great wheel or walking wheel because it was used standing up. Weaving was labor intensive, so most households used imported fabrics to sew their clothes. However, a spinning wheel was considered a household essential for making wool or cotton yarn for knitting. Girls were taught to knit at a young age. When weather prevented field work, enslaved people would also be put to work spinning and knitting.
11. **1622 settlement, oil on canvas, painted in 1956 by Sydney E. King:** This image was cropped from a larger painting depicting the Indian Uprising of 1622. Eleven settlers at Berkeley died in the attack and many more were wounded. Berkeley leader George Thorpe had invested much of his time to befriending the Indians, so the Powhatan's mutilation of his body in the uprising was particularly distressing. The settlers that survived the attack subsequently abandoned the settlement.
12. **Shoe buckle, 1700s:** Buckles were used to fasten shoes as well as breeches and garters. The buckle's design was considered a fashion statement, and a wide variety of elaborate designs have survived. Field slaves and working men usually fastened their shoes with ties that were more practical and less expensive. The simplicity of this buckle design means it probably belonged to a farmer or house slave.

GROUP RECORDING SHEET

Group: _____

Directions: Use all 12 cards for all sorts, A, B, C, and D. List the number of each card under its column, in the box with a dark outline. If your group thinks a card could go into more than one category, or doesn't fit at all, write its number under the question mark.

| SORT A: Describe everyday life in colonial Virginia. | | | |
|---|---|--|---|
| <u>FOOD</u> Food choices were limited. Meals were made of local produce (fruits and vegetables) & meats. | <u>HOUSING</u> Most people lived in one-room houses with dirt floors. Some wealthy people lived in large houses. | <u>CLOTHING</u> Women sewed clothes for their households. Most clothing was made of cotton, wool, or leather. | ? |
| | | | |
| SORT B: Colonists used different resources to produce their good and services. | | | |
| <u>NATURAL RESOURCES</u> Materials that come directly from nature. | <u>HUMAN RESOURCES</u> People working to produce goods & services. | <u>CAPITAL RESOURCES</u> Goods made by people (machines, tools, buildings). | ? |
| | | | |
| SORT C: Life was different for whites, free, and enslaved African Americans. | | | |
| <u>ENSLAVED AFRICANS</u> Slaves, even free blacks, were denied basic rights. | <u>SMALL FARMERS</u> Most whites & some free blacks owned small amounts of land. | <u>PLANTATION OWNERS</u> A few white Virginians were wealthy & owned large plantation farms. | ? |
| | | | |
| SORT D: We study primary and secondary sources to understand history. | | | |
| <u>PRIMARY SOURCE</u> An artifact, document, or image created by someone during that time period. | <u>SECONDARY SOURCE</u> An artifact, document, or image created afterwards by someone who wasn't there. | ? | |
| | | | |

FOR TEACHERS: SUGGESTED RESPONSES

Answers may vary, but students should be able to justify their responses. The card numbers under the question mark column may fit in more than one category, and will generate more whole group discussion.

| SORT A: Describe everyday life in colonial Virginia. | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| FOOD | HOUSING | CLOTHING | ? |
| 3, 4, 7, 8* *many food sources are listed | 1*, 6, 9, 11 *carpenters are highlighted | 2, 5*, 10, 12 *typical colonial garb depicted | 1, 5, 8, 9* *may sort as food due to pig |
| SORT B: Colonists used different resources to produce their good and services. (The 3 types of resources are taught in third grade SOL 3.8) | | | |
| NATURAL RESOURCES | HUMAN RESOURCES | CAPITAL RESOURCES | ? |
| 2, 3, 8 | 1, 5, 7 | 4, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12 | 8, 9 |
| SORT C: Life was different for whites, free, and enslaved African Americans. Students may have minimal background knowledge for this sort and need more support. | | | |
| ENSLAVED AFRICANS | SMALL FARMERS | PLANTATION OWNERS | ? |
| 1, 2*, 3, 7, 10* *Cotton would be grown by slaves and coarse homespun fabrics would be worn by them as well. However, fine cotton weave imported from India would have been worn by the middling class tradesmen. | 5*, 8, 11*, 12** *The early settlement is best described as a group of farmers. **Shoes for field slaves would be tied instead of buckled. The wealthy wore buckles with more ornate designs. | 4, 6, 9* *Small farmers usually built their initial homes from wood, but may have been able to afford brick homes later. Plantation manors were constructed of brick, with some outbuildings constructed of wood. | 5, 7*, 9, 11, 12 *Students may place this under plantation owner, since the meal was being prepared for the owner to eat. |
| SORT D: We study primary and secondary sources to understand history. | | | |
| PRIMARY SOURCE | SECONDARY SOURCE | | ? |
| 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12 | 2, 5, 7, 11 | | 2, 6 |

COLONIAL LIFE SORTING CARDS

CARD 1

| <i>Name of Negro</i> | <i>Age</i> | <i>Value</i> |
|--------------------------|------------|--------------|
| <i>Lewis</i> | <i>6</i> | <i>£ 15</i> |
| <i>York (blacksmith)</i> | <i>27</i> | <i>£ 100</i> |
| <i>Betty</i> | <i>29</i> | <i>£ 35</i> |
| <i>Frank (carpenter)</i> | <i>30</i> | <i>£ 75</i> |
| <i>Tom (carpenter)</i> | <i>50</i> | <i>£ 50</i> |
| <i>Old Frances</i> | <i>60</i> | <i>£ 2</i> |
| <i>Old Sarah</i> | <i>80</i> | <i>£ 0</i> |

Names and values of Berkeley slaves (1791)

CARD 2



Photo of cotton plant, fruit, and seeds (2017)

CARD 3



Pieces of turtle shell and muskrat teeth, the remains of a meal from a slave cabin (1700s)

CARD 4



Silver tea urn (1760s)

CARD 5



Painting of "The First Thanksgiving" (1981)

CARD 6



Berkeley Plantation Manor (1726)

CARD 7



Painting of enslaved woman preparing master's meal (1980s)

CARD 8

We do ordain that with all convenient expedition you cause to be enclosed 400 acres with a strong pale of 7 ½ foot whereby such corn, grain, seeds, vines, tobacco, and the like as shall be sowed or planted and such cattle as shall be transported by us or provided in Virginia will be more safely preserved.
- September 14, 1619

Letter from the Virginia Company leaders (1619)

CARD 9



Clay brick with pig's hoofprint (1720s)

CARD 10



Spinning wheel (1700s)

CARD 11



Painting of 1622 settlement (1956)

CARD 12



Shoe buckle (1700s)