

DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints
in Primary Source Documents

Slavery and Virginia's Enlightened Aristocracy

*How was it possible for Virginia's planters to own slaves
while championing the ideas of freedom and equality?*



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Debating the
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Teacher Introduction

★ *Using Primary Sources*

Primary sources are called “primary” because they are first-hand records of a past era or historical event. They are the raw materials, or the evidence, on which historians base their “secondary” accounts of the past.

A rapidly growing number of history teachers today are using primary sources. Why? Perhaps it's because primary sources give students a better sense of what history is and what historians do. Such sources also help students see the past from a variety of viewpoints. Moreover, primary sources make history vivid and bring it to life.

However, primary sources are not easy to use. They can be confusing. They can be biased. They rarely all agree. Primary sources must be interpreted and set in context.

To do this, students need historical background knowledge. *Debating the Documents* helps students handle such challenges by giving them a useful framework for analyzing sources that conflict with one another.



*“Multiple,
conflicting
perspectives are
among the truths
of history.
No single
objective or
universal account
could ever put an
end to this endless
creative dialogue
within and
between the past
and the present.”*

From the 2011 Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct of the Council of the American Historical Association.

INTRODUCTION

★ *The Debating the Documents Series*

Each *Debating the Documents* booklet includes the same sequence of reproducible worksheets. If students use several booklets over time, they will get regular practice at interpreting and comparing conflicting sources. In this way, they can learn the skills and habits needed to get the most out of primary sources.

Each *Debating the Documents* Booklet Includes

- **Suggestions for the Student and an Introductory Essay.** The student gets instructions and a one-page essay providing background on the booklet's topic. A time line on the topic is also included.
- **TWO Groups of Contrasting Primary Source Documents.** In most of the booklets, students get one pair of visual sources and one pair of written sources. In some cases, more than two are provided for each. Background is provided on each source. *Within each group, the sources clash in a very clear way.* (The sources are not always exact opposites, but they do always differ in some obvious way.)
- **Three Worksheets for Each Document Group.** Students use the first two worksheets to take notes on the sources. The third worksheet asks which source the student thinks would be most useful to a historian.
- **One DBQ.** On page 20, a document-based question (DBQ) asks students to write an effective essay using all of the booklet's primary sources.

★ *How to Use This Booklet*

1. Have students read “Suggestions for the Student” and the Introductory Essay.

Give them copies of pages 5–7. Ask them to read the instructions and then read the introductory essay on the topic. The time line gives them additional information on that topic. This reading could be done in class or as a homework assignment.

2. Have students do the worksheets.

Make copies of the worksheets and the pages with the sources. Ask students to study the background information on each source and the source itself. Then have them take notes on the sources using the worksheets. If students have access to a computer, have them review the primary sources digitally.

3. “Debate the documents” as a class.

Have students use their worksheet notes to debate the primary source documents as a class. Urge students to follow these ground rules:

- Use your worksheets as a guide for the discussion or debate.
- Try to reach agreement about the main ideas and the significance of each primary source document.
- Look for points of agreement as well as disagreement between the primary sources.
- Listen closely to all points of view about each primary source.
- Focus on the usefulness of each source to the historian, not merely on whether you agree or disagree with that source’s point of view.

4. Have students do the final DBQ.

A DBQ is an essay question about a set of primary source documents. To answer the DBQ, students write essays using evidence from the sources and their own background knowledge of the historical era. (See the next page for a DBQ scoring guide to use in evaluating these essays.)

The DBQ assignment on page 20 includes guidelines for writing a DBQ essay. Here are some additional points to make with students about preparing to write this kind of essay.

The DBQ for this Booklet (see page 20):

How could Virginia’s wealthy planters become such strong champions of freedom and independence in the 1700s while also continuing to own slaves?

- Analyze the question carefully.
- Use your background knowledge to set sources in their historical context.
- Question and interpret sources actively. Do not accept them at face value.
- Use sources meaningfully to support your essay’s thesis.
- Pay attention to the overall organization of your essay.

INTRODUCTION

★ *Complete DBQ Scoring Guide*

Use this guide in evaluating the DBQ for this booklet. Use this scoring guide with students who are already familiar with using primary sources and writing DBQ essays.

Excellent Essay

- Offers a clear answer or thesis explicitly addressing all aspects of the essay question.
- Does a careful job of interpreting many or most of the documents and relating them clearly to the thesis and the DBQ. Deals with conflicting documents effectively.
- Uses details and examples effectively to support the thesis and other main ideas. Explains the significance of those details and examples well.
- Uses background knowledge and the documents in a balanced way.
- Is well written; clear transitions make the essay easy to follow from point to point. Only a few minor writing errors or errors of fact.

Good Essay

- Offers a reasonable thesis addressing the essential points of the essay question.
- Adequately interprets at least some of the documents and relates them to the thesis and the DBQ.
- Usually relates details and examples meaningfully to the thesis or other main ideas.
- Includes some relevant background knowledge.
- May have some writing errors or errors of fact, as long as these do not invalidate the essay's overall argument or point of view.

Fair Essay

- Offers at least a partly developed thesis addressing the essay question.
- Adequately interprets at least a few of the documents.
- Relates only a few of the details and examples to the thesis or other main ideas.
- Includes some background knowledge.
- Has several writing errors or errors of fact that make it harder to understand the essay's overall argument or point of view.

Poor Essay

- Offers no clear thesis or answer addressing the DBQ.
- Uses few documents effectively other than referring to them in “laundry list” style, with no meaningful relationship to a thesis or any main point.
- Uses details and examples unrelated to the thesis or other main ideas. Does not explain the significance of these details and examples.
- Is not clearly written, with some major writing errors or errors of fact.

Suggestions to the Student

★ *Using Primary Sources*

A primary source is any record of evidence from the past. Many things are primary sources: letters, diary entries, official documents, photos, cartoons, wills, maps, charts, etc. They are called “primary” because they are first-hand records of a past event or time period. This *Debating the Documents* lesson is based on two groups of primary source documents. Within each group, the sources conflict with one another. That is, they express different or even opposed points of view. You need to decide which source is more reliable, more useful, or more typical of the time period. This is what historians do all the time. Usually, you will be able to learn something about the past from each source, even when the sources clash with one another in dramatic ways.

★ *How to Use This Booklet*

1. **Read the one-page introductory essay.**

This gives you background information that will help you analyze the primary source documents and do the exercises for this *Debating the Documents* lesson. The time line gives you additional information you will find helpful.



2. **Study the primary source documents for this lesson.**

For this lesson, you get two groups of sources. The sources within each group conflict with one another. Some of these sources are visuals, others are written sources. With visual sources, pay attention not only to the image’s “content” (its subject matter) but also to its artistic style, shading, composition, camera angle, symbols, and other features that add to the image’s meaning. With written sources, notice the writing style, bias, even what the source leaves out or does not talk about. Think about each source’s author, that author’s reasons for writing, and the likely audience for the source. These considerations give you clues as to the source’s historical value.

3. **Use the worksheets to analyze each group of primary source documents.**

For each group of sources, you get three worksheets. Use the “Study the Document” worksheets to take notes on each source. Use the “Comparing the Documents” worksheet to decide which of the sources would be most useful to a historian.

4. **As a class, debate the documents.**

Use your worksheet notes to help you take part in this debate.

5. **Do the final DBQ.**

“DBQ” means “document-based question.” A DBQ is a question along with several primary source documents. To answer the DBQ, write an essay using evidence from the documents and your own background history knowledge.

Virginia: Slave Society/Seedbed of Liberty

*"We hold these truths to be self-evident,
that all men are created equal."*

These may be the most famous words in America's Declaration of Independence. They were written in 1776. The main author of the Declaration, Thomas Jefferson, was a Virginia plantation owner. George Mason, George Washington, Patrick Henry, James Madison, and many other top leaders of the American Revolution were also Virginia plantation owners. All were strong backers of the Revolution's ideals of liberty and equality. All of them were also slave owners.

Virginia was a major slaveholding colony. Yet this colony also produced some of the greatest of America's early champions of liberty and individual rights. Many people today find this strange. They wonder, how slave owners could also become champions of liberty? It seems to be a paradox—that is, it seems to include two totally opposed ideas. These two ideas, slavery and liberty, just don't seem to go together at all.

In the past, history books tended to ignore this paradox. Men like Washington and Jefferson were great heroes. The fact that these heroes were also slave owners was ignored. In recent years, some historians have gone in the other direction. They say these men were cruel and cowardly for not attacking slavery more forcefully. They want us to look down on the founders, not view them as heroes. Finally, some say it is unfair to judge the past so quickly either way, until we first see it as those at that time saw it.

Slavery began in Virginia in 1619. However, it was only in the 1700s that huge numbers of African slaves began to be brought to Virginia. In part, this was because not enough white indentured servants were arriving to work on Virginia's tobacco plantations. It may also have been because life in Virginia was more settled and healthier. Rich planters could now buy slaves knowing that they and their slaves would live long enough to make

the expense worth it. Whatever the reasons, Virginians expanded slavery, made excuses for it, and soon even praised it. Harsh laws made it hard for blacks to have any chance of ever escaping slavery. The laws gave slave owners great power over their slaves—power to control them, work them, punish them and sell them, even by breaking up their families.

At the same time, many of Virginia's wealthy plantation owners were becoming refined, educated, "enlightened." In fact, the best of them were great students of the European Enlightenment, with its faith in reason and belief in the natural rights of man. They loved books and often had large libraries in their plantation homes. They believed deeply in using reason in dealing with all aspects of life—scientific, social, political, and personal. Few of them ever worried about slavery. Yet many of Virginia's best leaders did worry about it. In fact, some of them felt deeply guilty about it. In a letter to an opponent of slavery, Patrick Henry wrote:

*Would any one believe that I am Master
of Slaves of my own purchase! I am drawn
along by the general inconvenience of living
without them, I will not, I cannot justify it.*

Yet at the same time, even these sensitive Virginians did little about slavery. In a way, they seem to have felt trapped by it. Aware of it as an evil, they felt powerless to end it. Were they powerless? Were they cowardly? Were they brave for the partial stand they sometimes did take? Or did they simply not see the problem as we do today?

This is not an easy matter to decide, as the primary sources in this booklet will prove. Yet it is an important matter to debate. We hope you will use these sources to do just that.

Virginia Slavery Time Line

1619

- • • The first Africans are brought to Virginia. Also, America's first assembly of elected lawmakers meets—the Virginia House of Burgesses.

1662

- • • A Virginia law says that if a mother is a slave, her child is also a slave for life. This is one of many laws that start to firmly link being black with being a slave and make it hard for blacks ever to gain their freedom.

1667

- • • A Virginia law says that baptism cannot win a slave his or her freedom.

1693

- • • Virginia's College of William and Mary is founded.

1715

- • • Black slaves make up 24 percent of Virginia's population, up from less than five percent in 1671.

1730s–40s

- • • The religious revival known as the Great Awakening begins. Its preachers reach out to both blacks and whites. This revival movement leads many blacks to join the Methodist and Baptist Churches.

1750

- • • There are 236,400 slaves in the 13 colonies, with over 206,000 of them living south of Pennsylvania. Slaves are about 20% of the entire colonial population, but more than 40% of Virginia's.

1758

- • • A black Baptist church is formed on William Byrd's plantation in Mecklenburg, Virginia. It is probably the first black congregation in the colonies.

1772–74

- • • George Washington and others in the Virginia House of Burgesses send the British king a petition calling the slave trade “a trade of great inhumanity.” Two years later, Washington helps pass the Fairfax Resolves, which ask that no more slaves be imported into the British colonies.

1776

- • • The Declaration of Independence says that “all men are created equal.”

1782

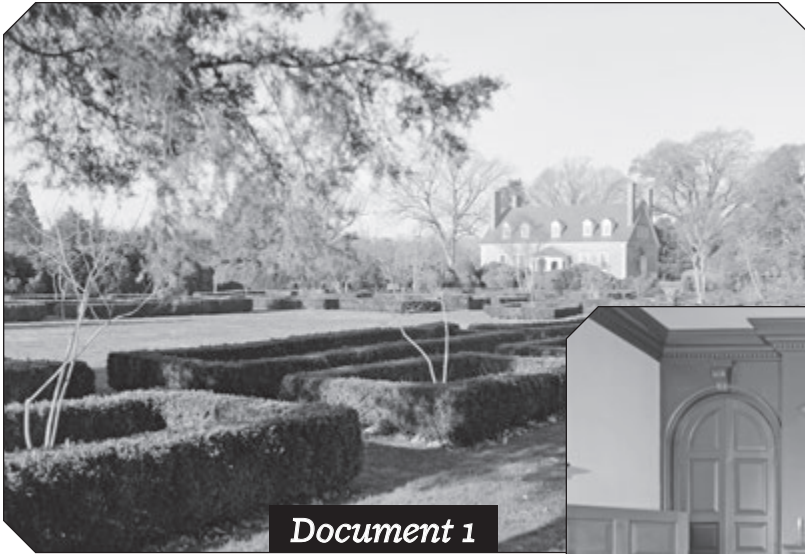
- • • A Virginia law makes it easier for slave owners to free their slaves. George Washington is the major slave owner in Fairfax County, Virginia, that year with 188 slaves, followed by George Mason with 128 slaves, William Fitzhugh with 122 slaves, and six others with 49 or more.

1799

- • • Washington arranges in his will that his slaves (now more than 300) are to be freed after his death and the death of his wife, Martha.

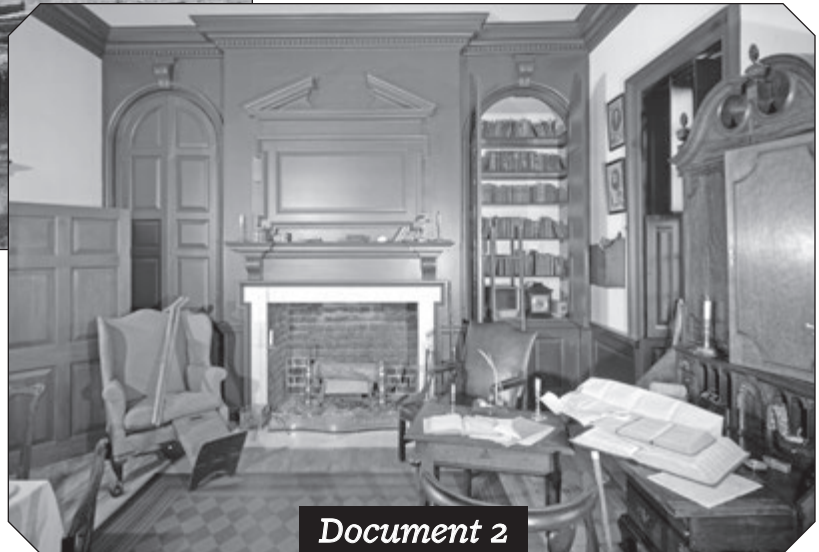
DOCUMENTS 1 & 2

Visual Primary Source Documents 1 & 2



Document 1

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division,
HABS, VA,30-LORT,1-23.



Document 2

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, HABS, VA,30-LORT,1-64.

Information on Documents 1 & 2

In the upper left is George Mason's Gunston Hall, which in the 1700s was surrounded by 5,500 acres of land. Mason was a wealthy Virginia planter and slave-owner. Yet he was also deeply affected by the spirit of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, with its a concern for both education and individual liberty. On the right is a parlor in Gunston Hall full of books and documents.

Mason became a key leader in the American Revolution. In 1776, he drafted the famous *Virginia Declaration of Rights*.

Later that year, Thomas Jefferson used that document's phrases when he drafted the Declaration of Independence, which Mason also signed. In 1787, Mason took part in the convention that wrote the U.S. Constitution. He refused to sign it, but still played a key role in getting the Bill of Rights added to it.

Mason was a major slave owner, yet he also strongly opposed slavery, which he once called "that slow poison, which is daily contaminating the minds and morals of our people."