

Colonial American Living Skills: American Craft Heritage

Subject Area: Social Sciences

Core Curriculum Content Standards: 2.5.A & D; 3.3.A; 3.4.A; 5.10.A & B; 6.1.A;
6.4.A & B & C & D; 6.5A; 6.6E.

DESCRIPTION:

Situated in a 19th century hand hewn log cabin, this session focuses on daily living skills and history of colonial America. Discussion centers on providing living necessities, particularly food and shelter (housing and clothing). Activities such as cornbread preparation, wool spinning and weaving, and an exterior and interior cabin analysis illustrate how necessities were provided for in colonial times. Comparisons are drawn between the environmental impacts of the colonial lifestyle and our present lifestyle with special emphasis put on differing sources of energy and renewable and nonrenewable resources use.

OBJECTIVES:

Students will describe how life necessities were provided for in colonial times, and how they are provided for now.

Students will be actively involved in fiber production techniques from the colonial period.

Students will explain their dependence on the natural environment, and the components of it that they use as resources to support life.

Students' awareness of their dependence on exterior or produced forms of energy (electricity, petroleum products, etc.) will be enriched, by demonstrating how the colonists accomplished their work without it. (e.g. considering the impact of the Industrial Revolution on their lifestyles)

Students will describe two ways in which members of a colonial settlement depended on one another.

Students will name products that a specialized craftsman had to produce.

Students will briefly review some of the early history of New Jersey, especially of the northwestern part of the state.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The colonial lifestyle is generally thought of as one with many hardships and tribulations. This is true when using today's lifestyle as the standard. Much of existence and means of obtaining necessities in colonial times was dependent on physical labor requiring bodily energy. Today, machines or tools powered by exterior or produced forms of energy are used to simplify tasks and increase production outputs. In most cases, using a produced form of energy requires the burning of a resource that releases emissions, causes pollution, and in some cases, degenerates a product that cannot be replaced (a non-renewable resource). The colonists accomplished their tasks without using exterior or produced forms of energy but such energy sources were not available. These early Americans were conservationist, but not by choice. Because they did not have possessions in abundance and had to labor hard for the things they did have, they were conscious to conserve those commodities that were scarce and were hard to obtain.

DeGroat cabin was home to 12 children and 2 adults. By today's standards, the cabin would seem extremely small to house 14 people. Building a larger house would require labor and resources that could not be spared or could not be obtained. Also, a larger living space would be more difficult to heat in the winter, requiring more labor to gather firewood. A large space was not needed as possessions were minimal and constantly in use (no need for storage).

MATERIALS NEEDED:

Carders and drop spindles are available in the cabin as well as are the DeGroat Cabin Scavenger Hunt cards. Kindling and fire wood are also available in the cabin as are a female and a male colonial

costume for the teacher to wear if desired. **PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH**, OR ALLOW STUDENTS TO TOUCH, ANY EQUIPMENT WITH WHICH YOU ARE UNFAMILIAR. SEEK HELP FROM THE SOC STAFF.

PROCEDURES:

1. (outside of cabin) Introduce session by setting the time frame that will be discussed; ask students what they know about the Colonial time period. When was it? What does 'colony' mean? Ask students to name the necessities of life. FOOD, WATER, SHELTER, AIR, SUN This session will focus on how the colonists provided for their food and shelter specifically; shelter can be considered in the venues of both housing and clothing.

2. Talk about shelter—perform an exterior analysis of the cabin. Ask students to list the natural resources used in construction. Ask them to determine which are renewable and which are non renewable.

The cabin was built in the mid 1860's, moved from 5 miles away to this site by graduate students from Montclair State during the summer of 1975. The moving process required numbering logs, disassembling and then reassembling the building, and replacing those beyond repair.

Ask students to describe the steps necessary to build this cabin. The cabin was built by hand. The logs were shaped with a broad ax to fit together neatly (show picture card); the large slabs of chinking reflect amateurish carpentry technique since the logs should be better fitted to sit snugly on top of each other. The chinking, which is a thin shell inside and outside, is composed of powdered limestone [cement], sand, water and straw to form concrete.

It is made of oak and American chestnut trees that were straight with a large diameter: 60-70 trees needed to build the house; trees represent more than 3000 years of growth; 3500 hand-split shingles on the roof; some iron used on the house, but very sparingly, since it was difficult to mine from the earth and required a blacksmith to shape it.

3. Move to outhouse. Talk about outhouse i.e. outbuilding - any building that served a needed function on the farm and was detached from the main structure. Point out that today we use this word to mean only one function—bathroom—compared to many meanings then. Other outbuildings were a spring house, a carriage house, a barn, a silo, a chicken coop—any number of support buildings necessary for the functioning of the farm.

This one is a smokehouse, used to preserve meat. Point out leather hinge on right bottom of door—they had to improvise for scarce iron and leather was more easily available and more easily worked. To smoke meat, it was necessary to keep a small, slow-burning fire going in smokehouse; one needed to use green wood for this, usually hickory or maple. Smokehouse needed constant monitoring—smoking meat was a very important job. If the fire got out of hand, a family could lose its winter food supply. This was the job of a child (age 9-15).

Other ways to preserve foods included: Which do we use today?

salting—expensive; salt had to be imported, unless area was on a coast, then salt could be obtained from evaporated sea water and used in corning and pickling

drying— used for meats, fruits and vegetables

jellies and jams—a means of preserving fruits

cheese—a means of preserving milk

Colonists ate indigenous bear, venison, turkey, beaver, rabbit, fish and other small game animals, as well as domestic animals such as pig, chicken, cow, lamb, which they brought with them. Corn, pumpkin, strawberries and cranberries are indigenous North American plants which the Indians introduced to the colonists. They would have brought from Europe grain crops such as wheat, oats and rye as well as cabbage, beets and fruit trees—but not citrus.

4. Go inside the cabin—have students enter via the front door. Ask students to count the number of people, including themselves, that live in each of their homes. Ask them to compare their living space with that in DeGroat Cabin. Remind them that although we use this cabin as a classroom now, it was

used as a home for two families, the DeGroats and the Sykes, for over 70 years. Ask students to enumerate the similarities and the differences between their own homes and DeGroat cabin. Consider similarities: building materials —general shape.

Differences: construction techniques [modern houses are framed]

- small size and only one room —why?
- lack of comfortable furniture and amenities—why?
- lack of running water—how would they have gotten water?
- how would they have taken a bath? List steps necessary.
- implications for water usage?
- energy usage?

5. Hold up a drop spindle and ask the students if they can identify it and its function. Pass around some raw fleece and ask students to compare it to something that is naturally part of their own bodies [hair]. Also ask students to tell you what they notice in the fleece after they have handled it [grease = lanolin from sheep's skin; debris = barnyard detritus caught in the hair fibers]. Ask if wool is a renewable or a non-renewable resource. [renewable—why?] Ask them to describe how the yarn becomes cloth [weave it on a loom]. Discuss the amount of time needed to produce something as basic as cloth. Would colonial people have had a large wardrobe of clothing, like many of us have today?

Demonstrate the teasing, carding and drop spinning process IF you are comfortable doing so. IF NOT PROCEED TO #6. Allow students to try the process under your guidance IF you are comfortable doing so, either individually or allowing one student at a time to use the spindle that you have. Discuss the coordination needed and the difficulties involved in performing this motor skill.

6. Ask students to divide themselves into groups of 3-4. Explain the DeGroat Cabin *Scavenger Hunt* and give a list to each group. Tell them that they need only to visually find the item and DO NOT need to bring it to you. Allow 10-15 minutes for the groups to attempt to locate the items, NB: there is a pictorial guide sheet for all items on the Scavenger Hunt list. At the conclusion, have children sit down. Ask each group to identify one item to the other groups. Ask students to tell you the items that they couldn't find. Why did they have trouble finding these? (Either students don't know the meaning of certain words like: sconce, eaves, sad iron OR they may never have seen the tools/processes [hog scraper, niddy noddy], since factories make these products.)

7. Go upstairs and demo the loom. Again, discuss the time needed to make cloth. Be careful that children do not pinch the edges of the cloth while weaving. Explain about the guilds—weaving was a male task in colonial days and spinning was a female task. After the Industrial Revolution, men became spinners since they had the strength required to operate the heavy spinning jacks while women became weavers and operated the power looms that did not require strength.

8. Ask students what would have been done with outgrown clothes then? [passed down to smaller children] With worn clothes? [cut apart and used to make something else] Can they name any ways in which cloth would have been recycled? Demo the punch rug—explain that this would have been used for upholstery and not as a floor covering, as we use rugs today. [Like 'outhouse', the word 'rug' has changed meaning.] Allow time for the children to try both weaving and punch rug.

WRAP-UP INTERPRETATION:

Gather students together and ask them to cite some differences between life in colonial times and life now: lack of privacy and sanitation; a lot of time was needed to get the basics for survival, which left them little time for things like school and playing; no external sources of energy, such as electricity, so many of their life support tasks took more effort. Discuss present day use of electricity—can we do without some items sometimes?

Ask them to review and enumerate the basics of survival. How did the DeGroats get these basics? What did they get from the forest to support their lives? How about today, what do you, living in your town, get from a forest like Stokes, that is necessary for your life? Is there anything that you can do to

be sure that we always have forests in healthy condition? Consider resource use and those resources that are renewable vs. non-renewable.

FOLLOW-UP:

Conduct a *Colonial Life Day* back at school, where students demonstrate skills. Each student can conduct a survey of her/his household's use of electricity during one week and a follow-up self-assessment of which of these uses of electricity are frivolous. Have students make a poster and compare how they would do some basic life activity [like brush your teeth or wash your hair or make cookies] then and now, and consider resource use. Student can write an essay from the vantage point of a colonial girl/boy of their age entitled "A Day In the Life Of..."

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