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Home Life in Colonial America

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: Focusing on the history, folklore and life style of Colonial living skills, in particular food preparation, open hearth and/or woodstove cookery, and architecture, the students will make a fire and prepare and eat an apple cobbler or cornbread. Child rearing and children's games, herbal medicines and superstitions are also considered. Most important, however, is the investigations of the linkage of previous use and abuse of natural resources with current degradations. The impacts of the pre-Industrial Revolution era in history on natural resource use will be correlated with contemporary paradigms. Also integrated is a simulation activity, which underscores the impact of the individual student on natural resources via his/her daily life style.

OBJECTIVES:

The students will describe an impact of their individual actions on the overall quality of the natural and human-made environment.

The students will explain their dependency on the natural environment for life.

The students will be actively involved in building and maintaining a fire, preparing, cooking and eating food representative of this historical era.

To acquaint students with the tribulations and uncertainties of life during this time in history.

The students will explain an impact of the Industrial Revolution on their own lifestyles.

The students will briefly review the early history of New Jersey.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

New Jersey, as the most populous state in the nation, faces many environmental woes. Due to its geographically central location on the eastern seaboard, it has long been a crossroads (the "Middle Colony" in Colonial diction) which accommodated a heterogeneous mixture of ethnic groups, religious affiliations, social strata and occupational interests. An understanding of the diversity of peoples who comprised the social environment of early New Jersey underscores the importance of diversity for the health of a natural environment. An understanding of the interdependency of the colonial family and the necessary sharing and assignment of household tasks to insure the survival of the family unit parallels a basic concept of ecology. Recognition/internalization of this interdependency and, most important, recognition of human beings within the biotic and abiotic realms of Nature empowers the students to assume an ethical responsibility for their own daily actions as well as to recognize their individual and collective impacts on the natural environment, both in their own backyards and also on a broader, national and even global, scale. An understanding of an era of more simple and local technologies may yield a key to unlocking contemporary environmental problems.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

The food preparation component of this session: is a skillet (or "spyder") cornbread. Pre-measured ingredients are available from the SOC kitchen. The following materials are stored in the Pavilion: the recipe, the food preparation utensils and cooking pots, the *Life Style Matching Cards*, which consists of a set of laminated sketches

of various artifacts of Colonial living and a separate set of index cards with the names of each artifact; tinder, kindling and firewood; matches; wedge and mallet for splitting wood and potholder.

PROCEDURES:

1. Gather students and ask them to define the time frames of the Colonial and Early American eras in history. Ask when NJ was first settled (*11,000 years ago by Lenni Lenape*). Briefly review European settlement (*1624 - Dutch in New Amsterdam; 1638 - Swedes in Lower Delaware Valley; 1664 - English in northern and eastern NJ. The Dutch first settled this part of Sussex County*).
2. Ask them to list the basics for survival (*food, shelter, clothing, water, oxygen, sunlight*) and describe how they and their parents procure these today. Set the time frame for class discussion of mid-1700's—ask the students to describe how these basics were obtained then.
3. Discuss the agrarian way of life: the involvement with natural cycles and resources, the crops grown, farm animals, the interdependence of the family ('chores'), and the self-sufficiency of the farm as an economic unit.
4. Present the idea that we are all connected to the natural environment. The chain was shorter in the time period under consideration. EXAMPLE: *Where did the bread for the toast you had for breakfast last week come from?* Elicit from students a description of the route from a farm in Iowa, to a milling plant, to a commercial bakery, to the local supermarket to their kitchens at home. Ask them to enumerate the natural resources used in processing and transporting the crop. Ask students to define non-renewable natural resources and fossil fuels. Ask them to list all which are involved with the route described above.
5. Walk to the outside of DeGroat Cabin. Ask students to list the natural resources used in construction. Try to identify the sources of the building materials. (*The wood, iron and concrete are locally obtained*). Ask them to compare this cabin to the construction of their own houses. Divide students into 4 - 5 small groups and ask them to try to calculate how much of the resource is needed to make each component of this particular cabin—count trees, nails seen, shingles, concrete, bricks, glass. (Either ask every group to calculate all components or assign a different building component to each group). Regroup and discuss which are renewable and which are not. Discuss the expenditure of human energy used in the construction of this shelter.
6.
 - A. Walk around to the smokehouse behind De Groat Cabin. Explain how the word 'outhouse' has changed meanings and now designates only one out of the many buildings, each having a separate function on the farm, which this word used to signify.
 - B. During warm weather, examine the herb garden. The TEACHER ONLY should pluck ONE leaf of various herbs and allow students to identify each leaf by smell. Discuss the function and importance of herbs then (*to preserve food and disguise rotten foods*) and now (*to enhance flavors*).
7. Return to the Pavilion. Explain to the students that we need two groups: firebuilders and cooks. Ask them to choose a chore and join the appropriate group. The classroom teacher may assist in sub-dividing the students.
8. Before starting the chores, ask the students to list the components of a fire and the ingredients necessary to produce the cornbread. Demonstrate the fine and gentle art of splitting firewood. All students should help to do this.
9. Divide students into two groups to make the fire and assemble the recipe. Put the pot on the fire to cook. Neatly stack the remaining split wood; replace unsplit wood in the firewood box; put the wedge and mallet away.
10. Distribute the *Life Style Picture Cards*, one per student. Place the matching name cards on the bench or table and ask the students to pick the name card that matches their picture. Ask each student in turn to show his/her sketch to the group and to explain how the artifact was used. An alternative is for the teacher to hold up each name card and to ask each student to display the matching sketch.
11. Elicit from the students some environmental impacts of those artifacts. EXAMPLE: the trencher, spoons, noggin, and settle bench are wooden and therefore come from trees, a renewable natural resource and were likely made by hand from trees in their own backyard. (*The satisfaction of artisanship, of creating from the raw material,*

something functional and necessary, may be introduced here. The rush light and betty lamp provided light in Colonial homes—what were the fuels burned? (The rushes were soaked in grease and the betty lamp burned a rag lying in a pool of cooking grease—in other words, leftovers. The concept of recycling could be introduced here and tied to the self-sufficiency of the Colonial farm).

12. Ask students how we light our homes today. How is electricity produced? (*Coal or oil burning power plants, nuclear power plants, hydro electric generating plants*). Refer to #4 above in tracing the route from natural resource to generating plant to consumer. EXAMPLE: when you toast the bread we discussed, what impact does that have on Nature?

13. Consider our cooking fire— what impact does burning wood have? (*As with fossil fuels, wood fires add carbon dioxide, a natural greenhouse or heat trapping gas, to the atmosphere. These heat trapping gases, naturally present in the earth's lower atmosphere, allow the sun's radiation in and prevent this heat from escaping back into space. Carbon dioxide is a natural by-product of respiration and plant decay. Others are methane, nitrous oxides, ozone and human-made CFC's. An increase, due to human activities, in greenhouse gasses —carbon dioxide has increased 25% in this century—is contributing to global warming*). Refer to #12 and production of electricity. Colonial people used fire to clear the land for farming. Not only would the fires produce carbon dioxide but also the trees and vegetation lost in this process would otherwise be removing carbon dioxide from the air. Ask students if they think that this was a problem then. Why or why not? (*The population was lower then; there were no human made chemicals or power plants then to intensify the problem*).

14. The cornbread should be ready. Distribute small portions, asking each to taste. If they don't like it, OK. Diversity is part of human interactions. What will we do with the leftovers? If we throw it in the garbage, it goes to a landfill; if we throw it into the woods, it attracts animals and is an eyesore. What is desirable? (*Compost; cook less to prevent waste*). Ask students to describe what they do with leftover food at home.

15. Stack dirty dishes and frying pan and return all utensils to the SOC kitchen for cleaning. Please be sure that the fire is out in the wood burning stove by closing the air vents. **DO NOT USE WATER TO EXTINGUISH THE FIRE!**

16. Since the chores are finished, have students play some typical Colonial games - tug of war, stilts—stress cooperation, not competition.

WRAP-UP INTERPRETATION:

** Ask students to list some differences between then and now (*e.g. less population, smaller towns, agrarian base of existence, more family orientation, children had household responsibilities, self-sufficiency of farmer, more simple yet appropriate technologies used, no electricity, no cars*).

**Ask each student to name one aspect of life that was more difficult in Colonial times than now or one aspect that was easier then than now.

**Review the human impact on the natural environment then. Discuss how basics for survival were obtained in Colonial times. Discuss effort involved and cooperation essential to their procurement.

Ask students to enumerate what we need for survival today that comes from the natural environment.

**Ask students to define the Industrial Revolution. Ask each to name one way that the Industrial Revolution affects our lives today. (*N.B. —burning of fossil fuels for power contributes to global warming—see #13*).

**Ask students which group was more important: the firebuilders or the cooks? Elicit that the active involvement in preparing food and building/maintaining the fire as well as the cooperation/coordination between both groups underscores the active involvement and cooperation necessary to mitigate the environmental problems currently facing New Jersey.

FOLLOW-UP:

Have students research the early history of their home community. Which ethnic group(s) were predominant? Use tax records and old telephone books. Has that ethnic composition changed? In what way?

Acquaint students with the methods of generating electricity, if they are not already familiar. Find out where and by which method(s) your community obtains its electric power. Get from the electric company or elsewhere list of kWh used by various household appliances—concentrate in class on those appliances students use frequently—e.g. iron, blow dryer, microwave oven, computer, CD player/stereo, TV. Have them keep track of their use of these appliances for a week. Total the kWh usage individually and compile into a class total. Have

a class discussion about ways to reduce consumption/methods of conservation. Do periodically throughout school year and determine seasonal variations.

With older students, incorporate math skills in determining each individual's use of mass appliances such as a hot water heater, clothes dryer, and dishwasher.

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