

REMEMBERING WILLIAM LEE



This activity will have students practice historical empathy as they explore the life of William Lee, George Washington's enslaved valet.

This activity is excerpted from Unit 1 of the Witness to Revolution Teacher Resource Guide. To see the full lesson and all supporting materials visit: <http://www.amrevmuseum.org/teacher-resource-guides>

CONTEXT

William Lee was an enslaved valet, or manservant, who traveled with Washington throughout the Revolutionary War. He first arrived at Mt. Vernon as a young man when Washington purchased him in 1768. During the war, Lee kept track of Washington's personal belongings, prepared his clothing, and assisted him with personal grooming.

In the painting, George Washington painted by Revolutionary War veteran John Trumbull in 1780, the man of African descent shown in the background is considered by many historians to be William Lee. Due to this, the painting has also come to be known as George Washington and William Lee. Trumbull knew Lee personally from his time as an aide-de-camp to General Washington, but his painting (which Trumbull created from memory while living in London) is more stereotype than reality. The man of African descent's headwrap or "turban," for example, reflects the concept of "exoticism," or a fascination with styles associated with foreign cultures that was popular among European and American artists of the period. Trumbull likely included the head wrap to emphasize the man's African ancestry, instead of showing what Washington's enslaved servants, such as William Lee, actually wore.

AIMS/OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

Investigate the role and experiences of William Lee, who accompanied George Washington as his valet during the Revolutionary War.

Use historical empathy to analyze the perspective of William Lee, George Washington's enslaved valet, during the Revolutionary War.

MATERIALS

Virtual Tour of Washington's Field Headquarters

<https://www.amrevmuseum.org/virtual-tour-of-washington-s-field-head-quarters>

Painting: George Washington and William Lee, John Trumbull, 1780, The Met

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/12822>

Big Idea: Washington's Tent and the Revolutionary War

PROCEDURES

Note: Ensure students have access to computers, tablets, or other devices with a working internet connection to access the Virtual Tour of Washington's Field Headquarters.

- First, have students read the section "People of African Descent" in the Big Idea: Washington's Tent and the Revolutionary War. This could also be a homework assignment prior to this activity. Then have them spend about 10 minutes exploring the Virtual Tour of Washington's Field Headquarters to consider William Lee's

daily life and duties during the war.

- Next, have the students share one thing they've learned from either the Big Idea or the virtual tour. Once everyone has shared, engage them in a deeper conversation around the following questions:
 - What work did William Lee perform while assisting General Washington?

See People of African Descent section in the Big Idea.

- Washington held many other enslaved people at Mount Vernon, his home in Virginia. How do you think William Lee's life was similar to or different from theirs during the Revolutionary War?
- What challenges might he have had to overcome? What opportunities may he have had?

Challenges	Opportunities
• Enslaved and deprived of freedom • Very little privacy • Having to live through the war front • A lot of responsibility with little room for error	• Becomes trusted by Washington • Elevated status among other people enslaved by Washington • May receive preferential treatment/favors for his service

- How might the size of Washington's sleeping and office marquee (tent) have contributed to these challenges and opportunities?
Lee would be in close proximity to Washington at all times, and he would be relied on extensively, but also would have been privy to conversations between Washington and others. Lee may also have developed a close relationship with Washington – which possibly created opportunities for better treatment for himself and others.
- We do not have any historical sources describing William Lee's thoughts and feelings. How do you think he may have felt about his experiences during the war? About his relationship with General Washington? What makes you think that?

- Then, display the painting George Washington and William Lee. Engage students in conversation around the following questions:

- Where do you see William Lee? How is the way he is painted similar to or different from how Washington is painted?
- Why do you think the artist placed and painted William Lee the way he did?
- Have you seen other portraits that included servants or enslaved people? If so, how were they similar to or different from this one?
- What observations can you make about the way William Lee is dressed?
- Do you think this is an accurate portrayal of William Lee? Why or why not?
- What are some different ways this painting can be viewed today?

For example, for modern audiences, the painting might be an illustration of prejudices that people of African descent faced in the Revolutionary era, and/or it might point to the fact that people of African descent contributed to the success of General Washington's wartime headquarters.

- Finally, assign students to create a portrait of William Lee considering what it would have looked like if he had commissioned it himself. What traits would he have wanted to see uplifted about his life? Who might be in the painting? What objects and images might he have wanted to include?

EXTEND: Have students research what happened to William Lee after the Revolutionary War. Have them create a timeline of his life.