

Building History Labs: U.S. History Lessons That Teach Critical Thinking & Other Citizenship Skills

Principles Upon Which Citizenship History Labs Are Built

My citizenship history labs are based on the following principles. Share and discuss them with students as they work through the labs. Not all principles will necessarily be in play in every lab, but one or more will be.

Principle 1 – Truth is not binary

Undoubtedly, this is the most counter intuitive principle. If something isn't true, mustn't it then be false? It is difficult for us to conceive of any other options since most institutions in our culture reinforce this binary approach.

Our schooling is filled with true-false and multiple choice tests where only one answer from each set of choices is correct. Most history instruction consists of stories with clear heroes and villains; specific names, dates and places to memorize; and good grades for those who provide the most "correct answers".

And it is not just in school that our culture presents us with binary choices.

- * As voters we must choose one candidate from a multiple choice list in each race on our ballots, and yes or no on each proposition presented to us.
- * In criminal courtrooms, defendants are judged guilty or not guilty after trials where two sides fight it out.
- * Our football, basketball, baseball, hockey and other sporting events always produce a winner and at least one loser.
- * Our businesses make money or they lose it.
- * Our wars (presented as battles between good and evil) are always won or lost.
- * News media claim that they try to present both sides of every issue.

Given all of this, how can it be that an assertion could be anything other than true or false?

I assert that it not only can be, but almost always is. Why? Because, the real world is much more complex than what we see when looking through institutional cultural lenses such as history texts, encyclopedias, etc.

Here are a few examples to illustrate what I mean.

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Ex. 1 - True or False: George Washington was born on February 22, 1732?

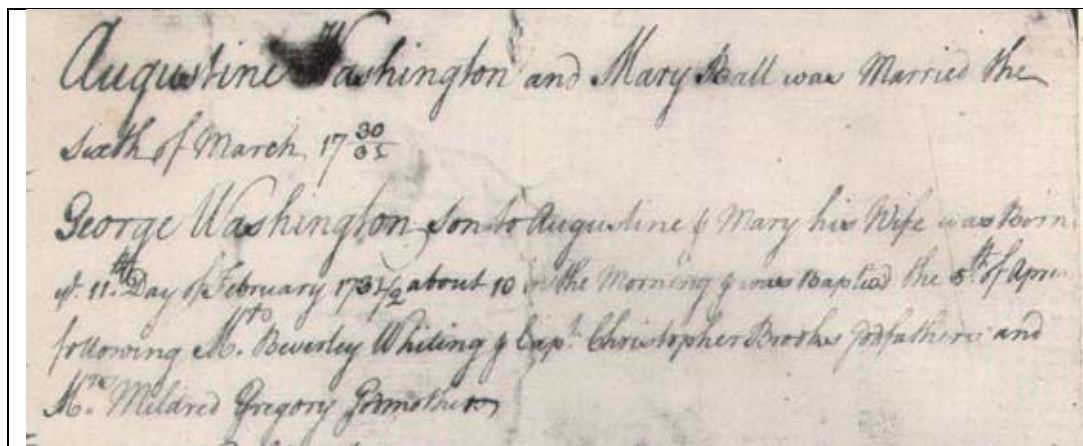
This would seem pretty straight forward. Most authorities (encyclopedias, history textbooks, biographies, etc.) tell us that Washington was indeed born on February 22, 1732. However, if we could board a time ship and travel back to Washington's birth place, we would find that calendars and local people would tell us the date was February 11, 1731/2^{xii}.

How can that be?

The answer is that when George Washington, the first President of the United States under the constitution that went into effect in 1789, was born, the British Empire had not yet switched from using the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar. That switch took place in 1752.

In the first half of the 18th century, the Julian calendar was running 11 days behind the more accurate Gregorian calendar. Therefore, the day we now identify on our Gregorian calendars as February 22 was February 11 in Britain and her colonies then. Additionally, New Year's Day was March 25 under the Julian calendar system. So at the time Washington was born, the last day of 1731 was March 24.

However, we don't need a time ship to know what people present at Washington's birth saw. They left this for us.



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The image above shows the first two entries at the top of a page in the family Bible belonging to Washington's parents. I have cropped them from a scan of the whole page placed on the web by the University of Virginia^{xiii}. The first entry records the marriage of Augustine Washington and Mary Ball on March 6, 1730/31. The second records the birth of their first child, George, on the "11th day of February 1731/2 about 10 in the morning".

A good summary of the calendar system changes that took place in Britain and her colonies in the mid 18th century can be found on this page of the Connecticut State Library's web site: <http://www.cslib.org/CalendarChange.htm> (accessed successfully by me on November 11, 2012).

At this point I need to note that the Julian and Gregorian calendars were and are not the only ones in use by humans then or now. To see where George Washington's birth date falls using some of the other systems, I visited the web site <http://isotropic.org/date/> on November 16, 2012. I entered the Gregorian date for Washington's birth, and was shown the web page that displays via this link:

<http://isotropic.org/cgi-bin/date.pl?date=2%2F22%2F1732>

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The page shows these calendar dates:

Gregorian:	Friday, 22 February 1732
Mayan:	Long count = 12.5.15.1.9; tzolkin = 3 Muluc; haab = 17 Mac
French:	
Islamic:	25 Sha'ban 1144
Hebrew:	26 Shevat 5492
Julian:	11 February 1732
ISO:	Day 5 of week 8 of 1732
Persian:	3 Esfand 1110
Ethiopic:	16 Yakatit 1724
Coptic:	16 Amshir 1448
Chinese:	Cycle 73, year 49 (Ren-Zi), month 1 (Ren-Yin), day 27 (Yi-You)
Julian day:	2353712
Day of year:	Day 53 of 1732; 313 days remaining in the year
Discordian:	Pungenday, Chaos 53, Year of Our Lady of Discord 2898

Another thing we need to consider when thinking through an answer to this true-false question is the name George Washington itself. I am quite confident that everyone reading this automatically assumed that when I wrote, “George Washington was born on February 22, 1732”, I was referring to the George Washington who commanded the American Army in the Revolutionary War, served as presiding officer of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, and later was elected to serve two terms as the first president of the United States under that constitution. Most people who’ve been schooled in U.S. History would probably make that assumption. However, I didn’t state that explicitly in the true-false question with which I began this example.

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I could just as easily have been referring to one of the people named George Washington whose name appeared as a result of a search I just ran at switchboard.com, a telephone white pages look up site. Here is what I found there when I searched for individuals named George Washington on November 11, 2012^{xiv}:

Name	Age	City/State
George Washington	69	Berkeley, CA
George Washington	49	Killeen, TX
George Washington	59	New York, NY
George Washington	51	Fort Myers, FL
George Washington	59	Homewood, IL

Had I been referring to one of the above, the answer to the question would clearly have been False.

However, even assuming I was referring to the George Washington who lived and served in the 18th century, was he the only George Washington born in British North America in the 18th century? To find out, I searched the 1790 census records^{xv}. I examined the records from all states. In these records, Heads of Families were listed by name. The only state listing George Washington was Virginia, and its Index showed three entries. Listed there were “Washington, General”; “Washington, Gen Geo.”; and “Washington, Gen George”.

Examining the detailed Virginia records for Fairfax County (where Mt. Vernon is located), I found that “Gen Geo Washington” was listed as head of a family with 30 “white souls”, 39 dwellings, and 21 other buildings. In Stafford County, “Gen. George Washington” is shown as head of a family of 6 “white souls”, 1 dwelling, and 10 other buildings. I assume this is Ferry Farm, Washington’s childhood home and birthplace. “General Washington” is the listing in the Fairfax County record that shows the census totals for white and black at each household. On that row, “General Washington” is shown as Head of Family for 2 white and 188 black people. Apparently there were no slaves at his Stafford County property.

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So, it appears that at the time the 1790 census was taken, there was only one George Washington living as a head of family in the United States. That was not the case, however, for the nation's 1st Vice President, later the 2nd President, John Adams.

Examining the 1790 Census indexes for the various states, I found 14 entries for John Adams in Virginia, 30 in Massachusetts, 8 in Maryland, 7 in Maine, 3 in Vermont, 7 in Connecticut, 12 in New York, 13 in North Carolina, 15 in Pennsylvania, 11 in South Carolina, and 0 in Rhode Island. Therefore, it would seem that anyone looking for birth records for our 1st Vice President would need to be extra careful to make sure s/he found those for the correct John Adams.

So, how is one to correctly answer the question, "True or False: George Washington was born on February 22, 1732?" That depends on the assumptions one makes. The correct answer is false if we assume that George Washington refers to one of the men with that name living today, or if we assume that the date is from the Julian calendar. On the other hand, the correct answer is true if we assume that the date is from the Gregorian calendar, and that George Washington is the man born in the 18th century who served as commanding General of the American Revolutionary Army, presiding officer of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, and 1st President of the United States under that Constitution. However if, like most, one hasn't thought through assumptions or examined available evidence, the correct answer must be, "I haven't enough information to know with any degree of certainty."

Of course if we changed the question to ask if it is true or false that George Washington was born on June 1, 1731; the answer would have to be false, unless we could find evidence of a man named George Washington born on that date under either the Julian or Gregorian calendars. I know of no such evidence.

Truth is not binary, and history is more complex than it usually appears when presented to us in school or by popular culture.