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FEATURE ARTICLE: “EARLY AMERICA THROUGH PRIMARY DOCUMENTS” By: Dr. Lynn A. Nelson

For centuries, we have understood the early history of the North American continent as the movement of white settlers into the primeval forest. We believe frontiersmen and women braved and subdued an empty, unexplored, uncharted wilderness to create America’s civilization and national character from the ground up. As early as the 1750s, Benjamin Franklin argued that Great Britain should relieve its social and economic problems by encouraging emigration and opening the “vacant lands” of North America to settlement, allowing the empire’s population to spread out and prosper. For decades after the American Revolution, the U.S. Census Bureau included in its Statistical Atlases a calculation of the “frontier line,” the point where the density of white settlement fell below 2 persons per square mile – a line which marched inexorably across the largely blank spaces national maps used to depict the West.

Over the last half century, though, scholars have challenged this image of an empty North America waiting to be peopled. Instead of a wild frontier, early America was a long-settled, long-contested meeting place of many different peoples. Different Native American nations had hunted and farmed the continent for millennia before Europeans “discovered” it. Long before English settlers arrived at Jamestown or Plymouth, European traders sought the continent’s resources and foreign militaries fought over its territory. Many scholars believe the inhabitants of...
Sir Walter Raleigh’s “lost” Roanoke colony were killed by Native Americans at the urging of Spanish Dominicans who had established missions as far north as Virginia during the sixteenth century. The Pilgrims’ Patuxet Indian friend Squanto had been captured by English explorers in New England years before the Mayflower set sail. He had travelled and worked in Europe for years before he managed to return to New England, where he found many of his people dead from an epidemic probably contracted from Basque fishermen working just off the coast. Squanto’s famed advice to the Pilgrims to fertilize corn hills with dead fish was probably not a Native American practice, but one he had learned from Spanish farmers when he was in that country in 1614-15.

Tennessee itself was well-known to Europeans and Native Americans long before the first British farmers settled in Powell’s Valley in 1769. Spanish, French, and English traders had been settling in native towns up and down the Tennessee and Cumberland valleys, trading for deerskins, since the mid-seventeenth century. The Chickasaw and the Cherokee drove the Shawnee from middle Tennessee early in the eighteenth century at the urging of their English allies, who wanted to remove the threat of the French-allied Shawnee. British soldiers entered Tennessee in the 1750s, building Fort Loudon in the heart of Cherokee country to fend off the threat of French encroachment from Louisiana. After the American Revolution, white settlers in Tennessee continued to struggle with Spanish and British officials and merchants who encouraged the southern Indians to resist American expansion. Early Tennessee did not become an empty wilderness in the minds of the peoples of North America until well into the nineteenth century.

Our country’s founding fathers had to face the reality of early America, even as they imagined it as a blank slate on which to draw their plans for an ideal republic. As he drafted what would become the Congressional Land Ordinance of 1784, Thomas Jefferson mapped out his ideal future for the trans-Appalachian West, tracing abstract, geometric borders for the new states the young republic would create out of the wilderness. To some of these imagined states he gave Indian-derived names, but most received Latin-derived titles like “Metropotamia” and “Equitasia.” Yet when it came time to explore the West, Americans had to accept they faced a continent already covered with the marks of people and history. Lewis and Clark’s 1803 expedition up the Missouri River to the Pacific was hardly a venture into unknown territory. Several members of the “Corps of Discovery,” like Pierre Cruzat and Francis Labiche, were métis, men of mixed French-Canadian and Native American descent. Métis trappers and fur traders had been working the hunting grounds and trade networks of the Missouri all the way back to the seventeenth century. Lewis and Clark took advantage of their experience and knowledge of the route, as well as that of French-Canadian translator Toussaint Charbonneau and his Lehmi Shoshone wife Sacagawea. For people like these, the United States was just a new trading empire extending its reach into the High Plains and the Rockies, like the French and British before them - and even the Russians, who arrived on the West Coast to hunt sea otter at about the same time Lewis and Clark reached Oregon.

A return by historical researchers to primary sources has been key to uncovering the true complexity of early America. The Library of Congress’s massive Web library, The First American West: The Ohio River Valley, 1750-1820, makes available primary sources covering the interaction of native peoples, European empires, and American expansion. For years, scholars ignored the vast French and Spanish records of early America, written in foreign languages and buried in foreign archives. Recently, though, the Library of Congress has started partnerships with the national libraries of France (France in America / France en Amérique) and Spain (Parallel Histories: Spain, the United States, and the American Frontier) to translate and publish many of these documents on the Web. Russian and Dutch records relating to America are also being made available.

While frontier settlers did not “discover” an already well-known continent, the history of early America – and early Tennessee – is now ready to be explored by scholars, teachers, and students through rich troves of primary source documents.
LESSON IDEA—FEMALE PATRIOTS

More than three years before the end of the Revolutionary War, General George Washington, commander in chief of the Continental Army, informed Congress of the hardships faced by his soldiers. They did not have enough food or clothing, and their pay had been delayed. Washington also described his soldiers’ plight in a letter to Joseph Reed, governor of Pennsylvania.

In response, the women of Pennsylvania decided to raise funds to assist the soldiers. To advertise their efforts, “An American Woman”—probably Esther Reed, the wife of the Pennsylvania governor—published the broadside The Sentiments of an American Woman in June 1780. It highlighted historical examples of female patriotism, proclaimed women’s gratitude for the soldiers’ sacrifices, and suggested several ways that women could save money so as to contribute to the soldiers’ relief.

On the back of the essay was a detailed, 11-step fundraising plan for women to modify as they saw fit, a plan that involved the participation of Martha Washington.

Have students read the transcription of The Sentiments of an American Woman. Break them into small groups and ask them to discuss these questions based on the essay: What have women done in the past to demonstrate their patriotism? What can the women of America do to show their gratitude for the soldiers’ military service? What qualities do women share with men, and how are they different? Next, ask each group to create an illustrated flow chart for the 11-step fundraising plan. Have each group present its flow chart to the class and suggest any modifications they would make to it.

Finally, inform the students that after the broadside was published, General Washington informed Esther Reed that the most helpful thing women could do would be to provide shirts for the soldiers. Although Reed died suddenly of a fever in September 1780, the women of Philadelphia made more than 2000 shirts for the soldiers and delivered them to General Washington in December 1780.

This idea can be adapted to meet state curriculum standards for eighth grade Social Studies (Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation, 1754-1820) and high school U.S. Government (Standard 6: Individuals, Groups, and Interactions).

LESSON IDEA—COLONIAL MAPS

The maps in the Rochambeau Map Collection serve as great examples of colonial and Revolutionary primary sources. The maps in this collection were used by Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau (1725-1807), when he was commander in chief of the French expeditionary army (1780-82) during the American Revolution.

Break students into small groups, and assign each a different Rochambeau map (you can vary the maps or focus on a specific region). Using the Analyzing Maps teacher worksheet, ask students questions from each of the Observe, Reflect, and Question categories. After they have answered these questions about their map, have them trade maps. How does each map demonstrate geographic features? What is the difference in purpose between the maps? Do these maps show expansion? Why would Rochambeau want these maps? Depending on time, students can continue to trade maps until they have seen every group’s map.

Note: Want to show your students a map of early Tennessee? Search for “Carolina.” The map “Partie occidentale de la Virginie, Pennsylvanie, Maryland, et Caroline Septl. la rivière d'Ohio, et toutes celles qui s'y jettent, partie de la Rivière Mississippi, tout le cours de la rivière de Illinois, le Lac Erie, partie des Lacs Huron et Michigan &. toutes les contrées qui bordent ces lac et rivière, par Hutchins, capitaine anglais” has the best view of Tennessee before it became the Territory of the United States South of the River Ohio.

This lesson can be adapted to meet state curriculum standards for 8th grade Social Studies (Standard 3.0– Geography).
**Colonial New York**

A View of Fort George with the City of New York from the SW [1736]

What flag flies over Fort George in this early image of New York City? Why did colonial ports contain forts? In addition to the fort, what else captures your attention in this engraving? What is in foreground? What predominates the skyline?

**Colonial Money**

Inflation. Even before they declared themselves free and independent states, American colonies issued New York Dollars and Pennsylvania Shillings, then later Continental Dollars—all so largely un-supported by metallic standards that soon any worthless object came to be known as "Not worth a Continental." [between 1940 and 1946]

What other colonies issued their own currency? How would so many different currencies have impacted intercontinental trade?

**Banneker’s Almanack**

Benjamin Banneker’s Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland and Virginia Almanack and Ephemeris, for the Year of Our Lord 1792.

Why were almanacs important in the 1700s? What types of information do they provide? What is special about the fact that Benjamin Banneker created this one?

**Town Rules**

At a publick town meeting in Boston, May 9th, 1733, and continued by adjournment to May 11th. Voted, that the following scheme, for setting up and regulating markets in this town, be forthwith printed. [Boston 1733]. [image cropped]

What rules were voted on at this meeting? Why would a growing town need such rules? What could happen without these rules in place?