



SPHERE

Fostering Civil Discourse and Diverse Viewpoints for Every Classroom

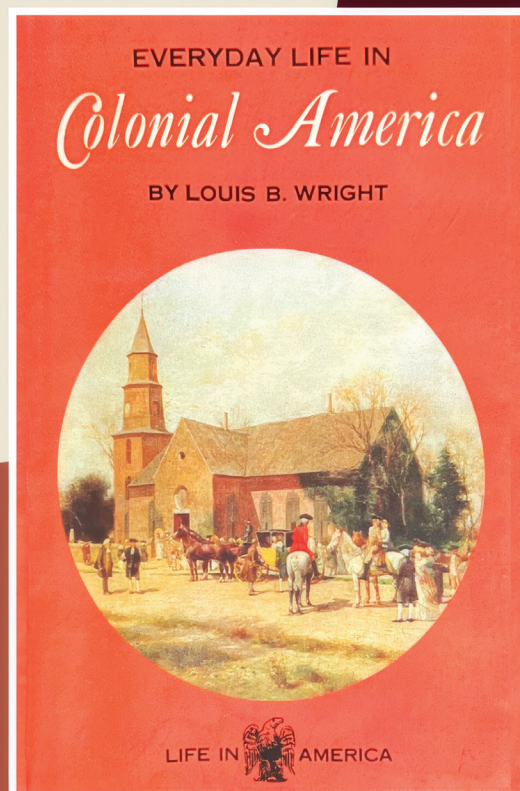
Grim Old Days: Louis B. Wright's Everyday Life in Colonial America

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GRADE LEVEL: 8TH–12TH GRADES

Lesson Overview

This lesson will engage students in critical thinking about historical progress and its impact on society using the article “Grim Old Days: Louis B. Wright's Everyday Life in Colonial America” by Chelsea Follett. The author sets out to “deromanticize the past” by providing a detailed and often grim account of daily life and societal practices in colonial America, aiming to challenge romanticized notions of the past.



Essential Questions

Have you ever wondered what life was like in colonial America? Do you think we've made significant strides in addressing the issues and problems of those times, such as daily chores, animal cruelty, and children's rights?

Media

"Grim Old Days: Louis B. Wright's Everyday Life in Colonial America" by Chelsea Follett

Warm-Up

Before reading Follett's article, have students take a moment to reflect on the following statements and decide whether they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with each. Then, engage in a lively class discussion, sharing perspectives.

- One of the purposes of learning about the past is to understand the present and create a better future.
- We will have progressed in addressing the world's most pressing problems in the next 100 years.
- Over the long run, the world is improving.
- It's possible to measure human progress, for example, by tracking progress toward the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

Questions for Reading, Writing, and Discussion

These questions will guide the reading and encourage students to think critically about the material. They will also be a basis for class discussion and the extension activities/homework.

- Which two New World products did quack doctors recommend for various ailments from the 1500s to the 1700s?
- Which specific task did colonial farmers have to do well past sundown?
- After the Industrial Revolution began, which two tedious tasks were first removed from the farm family's to-do list? Hint: they are related to clothing.
- Explain 3 activities that colonial people engaged in that most moderns would regard as needlessly cruel to animals.
- Describe the typical attitudes of colonial teachers and parents regarding corporal punishment of children, according to the article.

Extension Activities

The article says, “She [a typical colonial woman] had to cook and wash for the whole family without benefit of any labor-saving device; she not only had to make garments for all the family, including the menfolk, but she had to spin the thread and weave the yarn into the cloth for these garments. Her hands could never be idle.”

Have students watch a [short video clip](#) (55:20–56:47) from Hans Rosling's presentation about world population. In the clip, Rosling says that the family's washing machine saved his mom one day's hard labor and gave her time to focus on Rosling's education.

Based on their knowledge of world history, have students select a labor-saving invention—other than the washing machine—from the past 200 years. The device should make a boring task less tedious or eliminate it. Have students research and write a paragraph about the device.

In their paragraphs, students should describe the invention of the machine, its evolution to the present day, and its impacts on everyday life. Who benefited the most from the invention? How specifically has the device improved our quality of life?

NOTE TO THE TEACHER

You may want to make this task a poster project, Google Presentation, or short video assignment. As a further extension, students could present their work to their classmates and provide feedback to each other about it.

RESEARCH CHILD LABOR LAWS

The article says, “It had not yet occurred to anyone that child labor was evil, and children were expected to work as early as they could manipulate the implements of labor. . . . Children as young as the six-year-old Isaiah Thomas were apprenticed by their parents, who signed the indentures.”

It goes on, “Compared with modern concepts of working hours, leisure, holidays, and paid vacations, the life of a colonial apprentice was hard, monotonous, and dreary. He was expected to work from dawn to dusk and to keep busy in the evenings if duties in the household required it. He could not restrict his labor to any set number of hours per week, and if he had a respite on Saturday or a half day some other time he was more fortunate than most.”

Have students research the child labor laws in your state, looking for information on the minimum working age, maximum working hours, prohibited occupations, and employer responsibilities. Have them use this information to write a report answering the following questions:

- At what age are young people allowed to work?
- How many hours are teenagers allowed to work? Do the allowable working hours differ according to the season?

- Which types of occupations are people under 18 prohibited from engaging in?
- How long are shifts, and how many breaks must bosses give to young workers?
- What are the punishments for employers that do not follow these laws?

USE EVIDENCE TO CRITICALLY EVALUATE A SOURCE

At the end of the article, Follett links an article by Alexander C. R. Hammond that provides evidence that forest areas are increasing worldwide. Hammond's piece contradicts much of the current reporting on deforestation. Indeed, it is difficult for most people to believe his claims that world forests are recovering.

Ask students to play devil's advocate and critically evaluate a source. Have them use the nonpartisan site [Our World in Data](#) to write a short essay refuting at least 3 of the claims about reforestation made in Hammond's article. Their essays must use evidence to make specific refutations of Hammond's points. Have them write an introduction, a clear thesis statement, and at least 3 body paragraphs. Students should finish their essays with a nuanced conclusion about the reliability of the source.

Students may find that Hammond is mostly correct. Or they may conclude that he has used information selectively. Tell students to keep an open mind and be ready to have their assumptions tested.