

## Developing Professionally

# George Washington, at the Source

Since 2001, Andrew Ragan has used *JS* to help teach the history of the Western Hemisphere and the United States to seventh- and eighth-graders at Allendale Columbia School in Rochester, New York. He is the author of the American history play on pp. 18-21 of this issue.

### Dear fellow *JS* teacher,

Instead of providing a specific lesson plan to accompany the play, I would like to tell you about two great professional-development opportunities and some excellent resources for middle-school teachers. Rather than preparing a single lesson plan related to George Washington, you can take your pick from some great lessons developed by the George Washington Teachers' Institute (GWTI). They are available for free at [georgewashingtonwired.org](http://georgewashingtonwired.org) or at [mountvernon.org/learn](http://mountvernon.org/learn). You can also request a free CD-ROM containing these lessons, as well as additional materials.

### Bringing History Alive

The inspiration for "The General's Spectacles" came from an awesome lecture presented at a weeklong GWTI session in July 2008. The speaker was Dr. William M. Fowler, a professor of history at Northeastern University. Fowler was one of a distinguished lineup of Washington and colonial-era experts from the fields of history, education, art, drama, and government at this seminar held at Mount Vernon, Washington's Virginia estate. I was one of 15 participants in the program designed specifically for middle-school teachers. The Mount Vernon Education

Department also runs annual seminars for elementary and high school teachers.

Mount Vernon's summer institutes, its resource-rich Web sites, and its teacher resource center are great examples of some of the best-kept secrets in professional development for educators. Such programs and materials are sometimes free, provided at reasonable cost, or offered with the possibility of financial aid. Some seminars may also qualify for continuing-education credits.

### "Living" at Mount Vernon

Nancy Hayward, the Director of Programs at Mount Vernon, is frank about the intensity of the GWTI. She warns that you will walk extensively in muggy Virginia weather and eat, sleep, and breathe George Washington for an entire week. She is not exaggerating. However, the speakers are fascinating Washington biographers or Washington-era historians. You might dine with them or with "Martha Washington" herself, or picnic with the director of George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate & Gardens.

You might wake early to catch the sunrise on the Potomac from "the General's"



Andrew Ragan

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colonnaded piazza, or sip beverages on the piazza at sunset, after the crowds of tourists have departed. Mount Vernon's own archaeologists might guide you through Washington's mansion, including its *National Treasure II* basement. You might even get to view the Potomac and surrounding grounds from inside the mansion's cupola, as Washington himself did, a privilege not enjoyed by the general public.

There is no telling what you might learn from an audience with one of Washington's slaves, or how you will feel after a tour of Mount Vernon's new multimedia museum, a field trip to the great monuments of nearby Washington, D.C., or a private wreath-laying ceremony at the General's tomb. Through it all, you will enjoy a rich exchange of ideas with new teacher friends from across the nation. As one Institute teacher remarked, a week at Mount Vernon is a "life-changing experience."

### Accessing Primary Sources

GWTI is not the only history-based professional-development opportunity for teachers. The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History (GLI) was founded by two philanthropists who share an interest in preserving America's vital historical documents. The GLI's archive, which has grown to 60,000 documents, includes signed copies of the Emancipation Proclamation and letters written by George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Frederick Douglass. GLI's mission has evolved "to promote American history education in our nation's schools."

Each summer since 1994, GLI has offered as many as 40 history seminars for middle- and high school teachers, held in several states and even other countries. Topics vary from pre-Columbian America to the Cold War to "Teaching Digital History." When I

participated in 2005, the only cost for me was to provide a lesson plan using the historical documents related to the seminar topic.

Whether or not you attend a seminar, GLI's Web site, [gilderlehrman.org](http://gilderlehrman.org), offers hundreds of free lesson plans and document-based questions (DBQs) developed by seminar participants, plus historic documents from the GLI archives for you to view or print, and free podcasts of presentations by top historians.

### Explore for More

No doubt other history-based seminars are available at national, state, or local historic sites, universities, community colleges, presidential libraries, or other venues. But be sure to look up the George Washington Teachers' Institute and the Gilder Lehrman Institute's offerings. One of these educational opportunities may just change your life—or at least provide you with new inspiration for teaching history and bringing it alive for your students.



## Web Watch

**George Washington  
Teachers' Institute  
[georgewashingtonwired.org](http://georgewashingtonwired.org)**

**George Washington's Mount  
Vernon Estate & Gardens  
[mountvernon.org/learn](http://mountvernon.org/learn)**

**Gilder Lehrman Institute  
of American History  
[gilderlehrman.org](http://gilderlehrman.org)**