

LEARNING FROM PRIMARY SOURCES

Primary sources often are text-based—such as letters, diaries, and newspaper clippings—though objects also can be interpreted as primary sources. Using primary sources encourages students to:

- Form questions
- Reason effectively
- Examine details and use them to form conclusions

In this lesson, students study and interpret primary sources, including both objects (a historical house and a miniature portrait) and documents (a 1767 tax assessment and an excerpt from a 1769 issue of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*). Through these sources students examine the experience of enslaved people of African descent and ship captain and slave owner John Macpherson (1726–1792) at Mount Pleasant in the colonial era. (NOTE: You can read more about how to talk about slavery from [Teaching Tolerance](#), published by the Southern Poverty Law Center.)



Mount Pleasant

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Grade Level

For grades 4–6, adaptable for older students

Common Core Academic Standards

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.2](#)

Art Images Required

Click on the titles below to view high-resolution photographs on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Images that are also available in the Artstor Digital Library are indicated by an ID number or search phrase. Entering that number or phrase into the Artstor search bar will direct you to the corresponding image in that database.

- *Mount Pleasant*, 1762–65, by Thomas Nevell
Artstor search: mount pleasant philadelphia
- *Portrait of Captain John Macpherson (1726–1792)*, c. 1772–92, America (Made in Philadelphia)
Artstor search: 057-Mount Pleasant
- Excerpt from *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, January 12, 1769 (appended to this lesson plan)
- *Tax Assessment for John Macpherson*, 1767, collection of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of the University of Pennsylvania (*The particulars of each person's estate, as appears by the township and ward assessors' returns as follows [manuscript] / by Jacob Umstat, Barnaby Barnes, Andrew Bankson, John Roberts [?], Joseph Stamper, and Paul Engle Jun[ior], County Assessors, page 144r*)

Lesson Process

1. Examine the photograph of Mount Pleasant. Take a few minutes to look at it closely before discussing. (If viewing on Artstor, employ zoom to bring the entire image into closer examination.)
2. Describe the features of the house and property that you observe in the photograph. Using this visual information, respond to the following questions: Who do you imagine would have lived in this house? What would life have been like for its occupants? (Hint: look at features such as the size of the home, number of buildings, landscape, architecture, chimneys, etc.)
3. Now read the excerpt published in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* on January 12, 1769 (appended to this lesson plan).
 - a. As you read, circle key vocabulary words and any unfamiliar words and abbreviations. Why might this primary source contain unfamiliar words and words that seem to be misspelled?
 - b. Why was this primary source created?
 - c. What does this primary source tell you about the location of Mount Pleasant?
 - d. What do you see that you didn't expect?
 - e. What is the historical context of this primary source?
4. Next examine the 1767 tax assessment for Captain John Macpherson. Take a few minutes to look closely.

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5. Begin with a general visual study of the document:
 - a. What kind of document is this?
 - b. Why was this primary source created?
 - c. Where does your eye go first?
6. Locate the entry for John Macpherson (note that it is misspelled: "John McPherson"). Decipher and transcribe as many words and numbers as you are able. Refer to the transcription below as necessary:
262 John McPherson
69 Acres & Dwell £50 30
5 Horses 3/6/8
5 Cows 1/13/4
1 Servant 1/16/
4 Negros 16/
(15 additional properties listed)

Interpretive notes:

- o Taxes are assessed in British currency used throughout the colonies. The currency is noted in the tax assessment as: pounds (£, equal to 20 shillings) / shillings (equal to 12 pence) / pence (240 equal one pound). Around the time of the American Revolution a skilled craftsman would earn about a half pound in wages per week.
- o "69 Acres & Dwell £50 30" refers to the land and buildings of Mount Pleasant plantation. Its value is assessed at fifty pounds and taxed at a rate of 60% (£30).
- o The term "Servant" indicates a person in indentured service to John Macpherson. The servant was bound by legal contract to work for Macpherson for a specified period of time.
- o The term "Negro" indicates an enslaved person of African descent who worked for John Macpherson and his family.

As a class, answer and discuss the following:

- a. What information does this primary source provide about Mount Pleasant?
 - b. What do you see that you didn't expect?
 - c. What is the historical context of this primary source?
 - d. What feelings and thoughts does this primary source trigger in you? What questions does it raise?
 - e. What is the difference between a servant and an enslaved person?
7. Now examine the miniature painting *Portrait of Captain John Macpherson (1726–1792)*. Take a few minutes to look closely. Listen to the audio stops for this portrait.
 8. Miniature portraits were created during this period as personal mementos. Look closely and describe Captain Macpherson's appearance. Who might this portrait have belonged to? Why would someone have desired to have a miniature portrait? Who do you think would have had miniature portraits painted of them, and who did not? Why do you think so?

Assessment

1. How does using these primary sources together enable you to make a more complete interpretation? How does evidence from these sources alter or fit into existing interpretations of the past? What information is missing from these sources? Why do you think this is so?
2. Discussion: What do these documents tell us about the lives of enslaved people in Philadelphia in the eighteenth century? What do these primary sources tell us about the role of slavery within the culture?

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and the economy? How can this knowledge of enslavement at Mount Pleasant be useful in creating a more just society today? What can individuals do to discover, interpret and share this information?

Enrichment

1. You can learn about the recent [conservation and restoration of Mount Pleasant](#), with details about construction and the many objects within the building.
2. Research the history of free and enslaved African Americans in Pennsylvania. What do the terms anti-slavery and abolition mean? How are they different? What was the Free African Society? You might want to begin your research with the [Historical Society of Pennsylvania](#).
3. Visit historic locations in the Philadelphia area, such as Mount Pleasant, to learn more about the experiences of enslaved people in the northern colonies. Primary sources can also be viewed at the main branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

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Appendix:

Transcribed from *The Pennsylvania Gazette*

January 12, 1769

To be LETT, or SOLD, by JOHN MACPHERSON, (Who expects soon to go abroad) A PLANTATION, in the Northern Liberties (with great propriety called MOUNT PLEASANT) on the river Schuylkill, about 4 miles from Philadelphia, containing 160 acres of land, about 68 acres of which are in good grass, great part whereof is well water by constant springs, and from which were cut last year, at least 80 tons of the best hay, and it is tho't it will produce much more next year, as 12 acres of the 68 were put last year in red clover, and not mowed. There are a great number and variety of the best inoculated and grafted fruit trees, viz. apples, apricots, cherries, peaches, pears, plumbs, quinces, and a number of chestnut and shell bark trees. The kitchen garden is large, and within a stone wall, it contains a variety of fine fruit trees, above 50 beds of asparagus, as many of strawberries, and one of artichokes; there are three covered dung pits, with sundry other conveniences for collecting manure, a large covered fold for sheep, and a very convenient moveable pen for manuring the land by cattle. It is needless to mention the many genteel, regular and convenient buildings on it, as they are so well known; they at least equal, if not surpass any thing of the kind in North America; the situation is remarkably healthy for and beautiful, and the conveniences for fishing and fowling are excellent. The plantation may be easily divided into 5 small ones, on 3 of which are already built houses, &c. for tenants. It will be lett with or without the principal or mansion house, as can be agreed on.

ALSO for sale, with or without the plantation, 100 sheep, 12 cows, 3 steers, one bull, 3 horses, and several stout healthy negroes, one of which is a coachman, carter and ploughman; one a gardiner; and one a dairy maid, which 3 may be lett with the place. To be sold also a scow, a battle, carts, ploughs, harrows, rollers, and all sorts of utensils for the plantation, garden quarry and dairy. There are several quarries of very good stone, which a tenant may work, as can be agreed on. The place is under good post and rail fence, great part of which is ditched. If it is lett, the tenant may have all the hay and straw left upon it at a reasonable value; for the said Macpherson is determined not to permit wither of these articles to be sent from the place, while it is his property, which is mentioned to prevent trouble. No person need apply as a tenant but one who can give proper security for complying with his part of the agreement.

SAID Macpherson has also for sale, a plantation near the Rising Sun, on Germantown road, containing 40 acres of land. There are on it, a good stone dwelling house, log barn, stable and cow house, &c. &c. &c.