Introduction

The Story in History

Imagine for a moment that your life and the lives of each of your students were reduced to the following set of facts and numbers:

- ☆ Name
- ☆ Date of birth
- ☆ One significant accomplishment
- ☆ Date of death (if applicable)

Important, of course, but not nearly a complete picture. There is so much more that goes into a life—influences, beliefs, fears, hopes, loves, goals. And yet those are the very things that are frequently forgotten when we examine historical figures. Too often the focus is on the "four facts," and when students are asked what they know about a particular president or historical figure, they have only a few general facts to recite.

In many ways, the dramatic form is the perfect medium for bringing out the story in history. While we cannot reproduce exact dialogue or fully re-create historical events, drama does allow you, your students, and other observers to see the development of historical figures—what led up to their moment of destiny, and how their experiences shaped their lives.

The story of the United States is vital to the educational experience of young people because it is true and because it is part of a direct line that leads straight to them as Americans. It is also a story as fascinating and absorbing as any in literature. By presenting it in a cross-curricular context, we hope that it will increase students' fascination for the variety of influences that contribute to our national characters.

Our 42 (as of this writing) presidents have been national leaders, national symbols, and have sometimes shaped an era. In many ways, they reflected as well as shaped the customs and mores of the times they lived in and served. By presenting particular episodes of their lives, it is our hope that these leaders, who are so often idealized due to their historical significance, will be seen more fully as human beings.

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Our Purpose

These plays are intended to enhance students' appreciation and knowledge of our American heritage, and to:

- ☆ build literacy;
- ☆ increase class involvement;
- ☆ encourage appreciation for theater and acting;
- ☆ inspire independent writing;
- ☆ involve at-risk or withdrawn students.

Reading plays aloud is one of the most effective ways to promote literacy and history in your classroom. We encourage you to invite students to perform these plays as part of your reading, language arts, or social studies curriculum.

How to Use this Book

Casting Every effort has been made to have many characters in each play, including important characters for both boys and girls. However, don't feel limited by traditional roles. It can become an inclusive activity that helps to forge the connection between students and their heritage to experiment with nontraditional casting of ethnicities and genders.

Preparation and Predicting Before you begin, you might suggest students spend a few moments acquainting themselves with the characters they are playing by reading over the lines. It will enhance the educational experience, not to mention understanding and enjoyment, if you use a prediction exercise before the dramatic reading. Ask students if they have ever heard of the president in the play and what they know about him. Do they know anything about his background, his family, his life? Try using one of the classroom activities as a predicting activity, or have a volunteer look up and read aloud materials about the president's life and times.

Each play is followed by a brief biography that can be used as a jumping-off point for predicting and preparation activities.

> A great predicting activity is to have each student, the night before reading the play in class, find one fact about the president's life. Then have them each bring their facts into class for discussion. This will give students something to listen for (prediction and confirmation) as they read the play.

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Classroom Activities

At the end of each play are classroom activities, divided into three categories: "talk about it" for classroom discussion, "write about it" for written reports or small group projects, and "report on it" for group or class projects of larger scope. The activities focus on one or more themes of the play (bravery in "In Memory of Joe: John F. Kennedy," acting on personal belief versus the common good in "The Deal of the Century: Thomas Jefferson"). The activities are meant to be used in conjunction with the plays, but by no means should you limit your discussion or lesson to what is presented. Rather, consider using this material as a means to an end.

Many of the activities involve presenting reports to the class. As one of our purposes is to promote literacy, especially oral literacy, encourage students to present their reports to the class whenever possible, and have the class ask questions. You should find that asking every student to take a chance making a presentation will foster an atmosphere of mutual respect. The more you do this, the more comfortable your students will become speaking before a group, and the greater the pride they will take in their work.

You can move the activities one step further by having the students write their own dramas. Try having them treat the same episode from different points of view (other characters, etc.), or have them put their new knowledge to work by writing "next day" plays—pieces that continue the story.

Many activities are reenactments or role-playing games. Try assigning students different historical roles, have them research their roles so they know who they are playing, and then do historical reenactments in class. Rather than relying on lines and scripts, students may use their research and recall to improvise their roles. They will not only learn research and recall skills, but will develop confidence in learning and in themselves. They will also feel closer to the historical figures.

Larger Performances As a way of encouraging and nurturing students' enthusiasm, think about other ways to perform the plays. For example, try assigning plays of the same historical era to groups of students and let them rehearse and perform the dramas. You could also organize a "play day" around an era or other theme (the Civil War, the Great Depression, the two Roosevelts, influences of first ladies, Civil Rights, and so on).

If you find the class is hungry to perform the plays for a wider audience, take the plays before the whole school. Try calling on parents to become involved by donating or making costumes, building sets, making posters and doing other publicity. You will find that these activities can be done cheaply and with out much trouble—students can paint sets on large poster paper, which can then be hung at the back of the stage; Mom or Grandma's old dress could become a period costume. This can be a great way to celebrate Women's History Month, Black History Month, or, best of all, President's Week.

We hope you enjoy these stories of the presidents.

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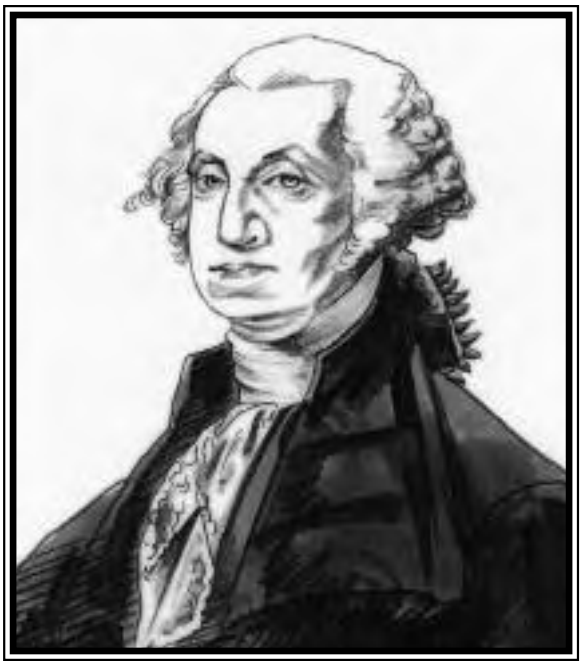

George Washington
A Christmastime Victory

CAST

NARRATOR ONE
NARRATOR TWO
GENERAL NATHANIEL GREENE
GEORGE WASHINGTON
GENERAL JOHN SULLIVAN
MARTHA CUSTIS, JR.
MARTHA WASHINGTON
JOHN CUSTIS
CONTINENTAL SOLDIERS
(JACK, TOM, FREDERICK, PAUL)

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★ Scene One

NARRATOR ONE: Welcome to the Continental Army camp along the Delaware River in Pennsylvania. It is December 1776. It has been five months since the Continental Congress, located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, declared the independence of the American colonies, and the Revolutionary War is raging on.

NARRATOR TWO: At this point, it is not going well for the new Americans. As General George Washington meets with his staff—Generals Nathaniel Greene and John Sullivan—they give him the news.

GREENE: Sir, things look bad. We lost a thousand men at the Battle of Long Island, along with their weapons and supplies. As for the men we have left, their enlistments are ended, and we have no money to pay them. Without money, they certainly will not reenlist. So it looks like our great revolution is doomed to failure.

GEORGE: What do you mean, we don't have the money to pay the soldiers or buy the supplies? Congress was supposed to send it to us!

SULLIVAN: *(looking sheepish and shrugging)* I know they were supposed to send it, sir. And I hoped that being in Pennsylvania near their headquarters, we would hear from them faster…but…

GREENE: *(interrupting, nervously)* But when Congress heard that we were coming into Pennsylvania, they feared the Redcoats would follow us, and…and…they have fled the city!

GEORGE: Blast! How can this be? The Congress declares war, then expects us to fight it without weapons, ammunition, food for the men, blankets to keep them warm, or money to pay them what they are worth. This meeting is over, gentlemen. That's all.

NARRATOR ONE: Outside the meeting, the generals spoke of their worries about their commander.

SULLIVAN: General Washington seems to be desperate.

GREENE: Well, our situation is desperate. Can you imagine what the British will do to us if we lose this war? The colonies will be back under King George's rule, and we'll be hanged as traitors! If only we could get what we need from the Congress, we could mount an attack on the British.

SULLIVAN: If only.

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★ Scene Two

NARRATOR TWO: Meanwhile, at Mount Vernon, Martha Washington was also worried. She had received George's letters and knew how close he was to giving up hope. The Washington children, John and Martha Custis, Jr., loved him, and they were as worried as Martha.

MARTHA, JR.: Why does Daddy need money, Mama? Can't the soldiers just fight?

MARTHA: With what, dear? Their bare hands? And on empty stomachs, in the freezing cold? And against the British, who are so well armed and well fed?

JOHN: Well, can't our men just sit tight until help comes?

MARTHA: What if help doesn't come? And your daddy says every day he worries about the large Redcoat army getting closer. If they were to attack our men now, all would be lost.

MARTHA, JR.: How did this happen? I thought the army was doing so well!

MARTHA: They did well in New England in the early parts of the war, then the army moved down to New York. They fortified Manhattan and Brooklyn with soldiers, but he didn't think the British were going to come up into Staten Island. The British came at our army from the back, and our men were trapped.

MARTHA, JR.: I remember.

MARTHA: Daddy managed to get what was left of the army out of New York, across New Jersey and into Pennsylvania, but now the British are following him. Our men are safe for the moment, but they are running out of food and supplies.

JOHN: So if they can't get food and supplies from the Congress, can they get them from somewhere else?

MARTHA: I don't know, son. But I have faith in your father. I'm sure he'll think of something.

★ Scene Three

NARRATOR ONE: Jack, a Continental soldier, enters George's tent.

JACK: General, one of our scouts has made it back to camp. He reports that there is a band of Hessian mercenaries from the British army encamped at Trenton.

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SULLIVAN: That's right across the Delaware River from our camp!

GEORGE: Let's have the report.

JACK: Well, sir, according to the scout, there are over one thousand. It looks like they're going to be there for a while.

GEORGE: We have twenty-four hundred men here, so they can't have come to attack us. I'd like to know just why they are here now, though …

JACK: It seemed like they came to hold the camp until the British arrive.

GEORGE: Maybe…General Greene, what date is it?

GREENE: December twentieth, sir.

SULLIVAN: I meant to speak with you on that subject, sir. The men are asking if they could return home for Christmas.

GEORGE: Christmas—that's it! The Hessians are camping there because it's Christmas! Of course! They're not here to attack us—they don't even know we're here—they've simply set up a camp in order to take a Christmas leave. Sullivan?

SULLIVAN: Yes, sir!

GEORGE: Cancel all Christmas leave for our men.

SULLIVAN: General, you are aware that the morale of the troops is very low.

GEORGE: I know. I know that they want to go home. *(Smiling and clapping his hands together.)* But maybe we can give them something better than a leave.

GREENE: I don't understand, sir.

GEORGE: You will, Greene, you will. You all will. Leave me a moment to think, all of you. Dismissed.

GREENE, SULLIVAN, and JACK: Yes, sir!

★ Scene Four

NARRATOR TWO: Jack went back to his tent, where other Continentals, Frederick, Tom, and Paul, gathered around him.

PAUL: Did you tell the general we're hungry and cold?

JACK: Believe me, General Washington knows what we need.

FREDERICK: So what's he going to do?

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JACK: He's got a plan, a big plan, I can tell.

FREDERICK: How can you tell?

JACK: Because I saw his face when I told him about the Hessians. I could tell he was thinking of something, something big, something he wouldn't even tell his other generals!

TOM: Gee, what do you think it could be?

PAUL: Whatever it is, I hope it includes food and blankets.

★ Scene Five

NARRATOR ONE: George was in his tent, thinking of a daring plan, and when he was sure it would work, he called his generals together to inform them.

GEORGE: Gentlemen, the Hessians across the river are rich in supplies, food, blankets, and ammunition. And they are lying over there, resting through the Christmas holidays. They don't expect an attack. We can load up in rowboats, move silently across the Delaware River under cover of night, and be upon the Hessians by dawn. We will catch them completely by surprise.

GREENE: Rowboats? We'll need hundreds.

GEORGE: We will use and reuse the boats we have until all our men are across the river. It will take all night, but with ten men in ten boats each, we'll have to make twenty trips. The river is not wide at this point. We will all be across just before dawn breaks.

SULLIVAN: But sir, the river is choked with ice!

GEORGE: It will be dark, and with the Hessians celebrating, we will be able to take our time. We'll take all night, if we need to. And once we're all across, we'll surround the Hessian camp and spring on them at first light! Any other questions?

SULLIVAN: Attacking on Christmas, is that…fair?

GEORGE: Look here—our men are freezing to death. We are about to run out of food. And, worst of all, their spirit is suffering. We have not won a battle in a year. We need supplies, but we also need a victory. The morale of the troops is as important to an army as weapons or supplies. Without morale, we have nothing.

GREENE: Sir, our ammunition is low.

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GEORGE: By coming up on them by surprise, we'll beat them to their guns. And don't forget, we outnumber them by more than two to one.

SULLIVAN: General, I think it's a brilliant plan.

GREENE: As do I.

GEORGE: Then prepare your troops. We will mass at the river on Christmas night. In the meantime, go celebrate with your men.

★ Scene Six

NARRATOR TWO: And so George Washington, with Greene and Sullivan and twenty-four hundred men, prepared to cross the Delaware. It was a very dangerous crossing, even though the river was not very wide. The ice on the river made passing treacherous, and many boats were damaged, but none sank.

NARRATOR ONE: The crossing took much longer than George thought, but by early morning the Continental Army was across the river. Once on the New Jersey side of the Delaware River, the soldiers could hear the Hessians laughing and singing.

TOM: Listen to them, whooping it up.

FREDERICK: They've got it good.

JACK: Yes, but in the morning, they'll be too tired to fight.

GEORGE: *(walking over to the soldiers)* That is the plan, men. They'll eat too much, drink too much, and be deeply asleep by the time we're upon them. Now hush, let's not alert them to our presence.

ALL: Yes, General.

JACK: See, I told you he had a great plan!

NARRATOR TWO: By eight o'clock on the morning of December twenty-sixth, Washington's troops had the Hessian camp surrounded. With the sun barely up, George gave the order.

GEORGE: CHARGE!

FREDERICK: Wake up, you Hessians!

JACK: Attack! Attack!

TOM: Yahoo!

NARRATOR ONE: As the Continental soldiers stormed the Hessian camp, the Hessians struggled to wake up from their night of partying.

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GREENE: Round them up! Round all of them up! Take the ammunition!

NARRATOR TWO: In less than one hour, the battle was over. Washington's army lost only five men, but they had captured better than nine hundred of the one thousand Hessians.

NARRATOR ONE: They were also able to take the Hessians' supplies of food, blankets, tents, and ammunition. But most important, the battle restored the sagging spirits of the Continental Army. They had scored a major victory while losing nearly nothing in return.

★ Scene Seven

NARRATOR TWO: By nightfall, George and the Continental Army had returned to their camp in Pennsylvania. Fresh from their victory, the troops celebrated.

PAUL: Three cheers for General Washington!

JACK: Hip, hip…

ALL: Hooray!

TOM: Hip, hip…

ALL: Hooray!

FREDERICK: Hip, hip—

GEORGE: *(interrupting)* Thank you, men. This was an important victory. We'll now have not only the supplies, but the strength to go on. Without this victory, we would have had to surrender. Now, at least, we have some hope.

NARRATOR ONE: They did have hope, and strength. The war would last five more years, and the Continentals would face many more tough battles with the Redcoats, not to mention another very difficult winter at Valley Forge. But the Continental Army never lost faith in George Washington. He knew their needs, and he knew how to plan battles to give the undermanned, undersupplied army the best chance.

NARRATOR TWO: And when they finally won the Battle of Yorktown, which led to the British surrender, the troops' faith in George Washington was rewarded. It was as a general that George Washington was first known as the "Father of Our Country." And it all started with his Christmas present to his troops, the Battle of Trenton.

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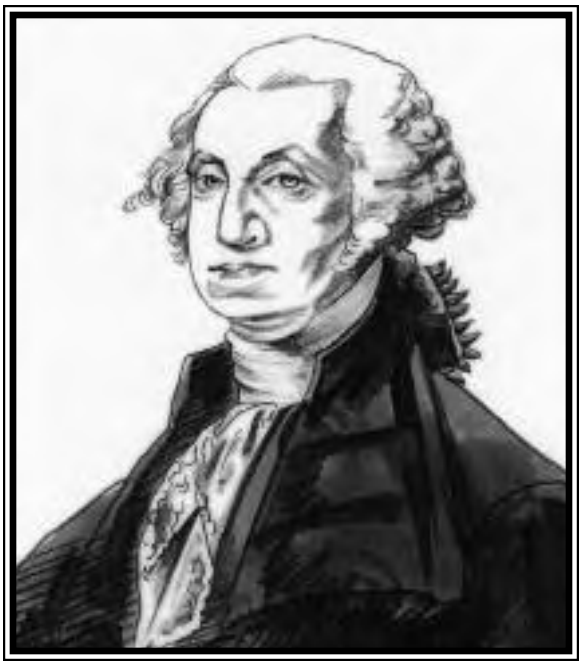

George Washington
Teacher's Guide

Biography

George Washington was born on February 22, 1732, in Virginia. He became a surveyor at 15. In 1753 the governor of Virginia appointed him Major in the Virginia militia. He was soon promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and led a troop during the French and Indian War. By 1755 he was named commander of the entire Virginia militia.

Independently wealthy from his successful plantations, he accepted no pay for his military service to the colonies. After leading the daring Christmas day raid on the Hessian troops, Washington was able to bring his army back near his home in Virginia for the battle at Yorktown, which the British lost, ending the war.

After a brief return to Martha and Mount Vernon, Washington was soon called back to government for the Constitutional Convention of 1787. He was quickly elected to lead the convention, and when the time came to vote for president, as provided in the Constitution, one name appeared on every electoral ballot—George Washington.

As president, he established a strong central government, and put the nation on sound financial footing by establishing what became the Federal Reserve and a property tax and tariffs. While he was president, Vermont, Kentucky, and Tennessee became states. He served two terms, retired from the presidency in 1797, and died at Mount Vernon in 1799.

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Classroom Activities

★ Talk About It

Before reading the play, discuss vocabulary words that may be unfamiliar, like *Hessians, Continental Army,* and *mercenary.*

Washington and his officers and his men believed that the Hessian mercenaries would not fight as well as the Redcoats themselves, who were fighting for their native land, Britain, or the Continental soldiers, who were fighting for their new land and freedom. What do your students think? Why?

Discuss the concept of a mercenary person, one who does something only for money. Does it apply to situations other than the military? Mercenary still has a negative connotation. Should it?

★ Write About It

Many of the Continental soldiers were young boys, not much older than your students. Invite students to imagine themselves as young soldiers, writing letters home to family members from a Continental Army camp along the Delaware. Students may wish to choose one of the characters in the play and write a diary entry from that person's point of view, describing the feelings and events leading up to the battle.

★ Report on It

If the Battle of Trenton had been lost, the course of the war would have been very different. The United States might not exist: America might be part of the British Commonwealth. Students might want to research British life, and report on how their lives would be different if the United States was still a part of Britain. We would use different words (*trainers* for sneakers, for example, or *pudding* for dessert), and many events in our history (the Civil War, our entry into World War I and II) would have been different or not happened at all.

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