
Washing Day Relays

Social Studies Standards

Kindergarten - Yellow
1st Grade - Orange
2nd Grade - Green
3rd Grade - Light Blue
4th Grade - Red
5th Grade - Purple
Arkansas History - Grey

G.1.K.6 Identify the influence of weather and climate on people's daily lives.

H.1.K.3 Compare the life of a student today (present) to the life of a student in the past using visual representations (e.g., growing food, rules and laws, making clothing, transportation, communication).

H.1.K.7 Describe materials and methods that allow people to learn about the past (e.g., photos, artifacts, diaries, oral history, stories)

G.1.1.5 Discuss how cultural characteristics contribute to diversity in a community, place, or region.

G.1.1.6 Describe the influence of weather, climate, and physical characteristics on people's daily lives.

G.1.1.7 Explain ways people utilize natural resources such as timber, minerals, oil, coal, and natural gas in their community.

H.1.1.1 Explain similarities and differences of everyday life in different times using chronological terms.

H.1.1.3 Compare present day families, objects, and events with those in the past using visual representations, news stories, and artifacts (e.g., daily life tasks, food, clothing, transportation, communication, recreation).

H.1.1.7 Draw conclusions about life in the past using historical records and artifacts (e.g., photos, diaries, oral history).

G.1.2.6 Explain the influence of weather, climate, and physical characteristics on people's daily lives in a place or region.

H.1.2.3 Compare life in a community past and present using maps, photographs, news stories, artifacts, or interviews (e.g., transportation, communication, recreation, jobs, housing).

G.1.3.5 Investigate the cultural characteristics of various places and regions from around the world.

H.1.3.3 Compare life from a specific historical time period to life today noting changes over time (e.g., transportation, jobs, urban growth, population density, natural resources, communication).

H.1.4.3 Compare life from a specific historical time period to life today to explain changes over time (e.g., economic growth, urbanization, resources, population density, environmental issues).

G.3.5.4 Research the characteristics of various world regions and cultures

Vocabulary

Washboard:

A board having a corrugated surface on which clothes can be rubbed in the process of laundering

Laundry:

clothes that need to be washed

Washtub:

a large container used for washing

Soap:

a substance that is used as a cleaner and that dissolves in water

Context

Washing Clothes in the 1840s

In the 1840s, Arkansas was a frontier state with a largely rural and agrarian society. The state was sparsely populated, and most households were self-sufficient farms. Daily life was labor-intensive, and household chores, including washing clothes, were done by hand without modern conveniences.

Water was usually drawn from wells, rivers, or streams. Fetching water was laborious and time-consuming, often done by women and children. In some households, rainwater was collected in barrels for washing purposes.

Washing Equipment:

- Washboards: Wooden or metal boards with ridged surfaces were used to scrub clothes.
- Tubs and Buckets: Wooden or metal tubs were used to soak and wash clothes.
- Soap: Homemade soap was common. It was typically made from lye (extracted from wood ashes) and animal fats.

Process of Washing Clothes:

First, clothes were soaked in water to loosen dirt. Then they were scrubbed on washboards to remove dirt and stains. After scrubbing, clothes were rinsed in clean water to remove soap and remaining dirt. Water was wrung out of clothes by twisting them by hand or using a wringer (if available). Once done, the clothes were hung on lines or laid out on bushes and grass to dry in the sun.

Washing clothes was a physically demanding and time-consuming task. It typically took an entire day, often referred to as “wash day.” This chore was primarily the responsibility of women, though children and sometimes men helped. Washing clothes in winter was especially difficult due to freezing temperatures. Water had to be heated on stoves or over fires. While in summer, the heat made the chore exhausting, but drying clothes was faster.

Clothes were made from natural fibers like cotton, wool, and linen. These materials required different care, with wool needing gentler handling to avoid shrinkage and damage.

Washing clothes was a communal activity in some communities. Women often gathered to wash clothes together, providing social interaction and mutual assistance. The cleanliness of clothes was a marker of social status and personal pride. Even though the process was laborious, people took great care to keep their garments clean.

Context

Teaching Tips

- Visual Aids: Use provided pictures or replicas of washboards, tubs, and other washing equipment from the period.
- Hands-on Activities: At the Historic Arkansas Museum, students will have the opportunity to use a washboard.
- Comparative Analysis: Compare and contrast washing clothes in the 1840s with modern methods. Discuss the technological advancements and their impact on daily life.
- Primary Sources: Included are diaries, letters, or accounts from people living in the 1840s to provide firsthand perspectives.

Discussion Questions:

- How did the process of washing clothes in the 1840s differ from today?
- What does this chore tell us about the daily lives of people, especially women, during this period?
- How did the invention of modern appliances like washing machines change household chores and gender roles?

Understanding the labor-intensive nature of washing clothes in the 1840s can provide students with a deeper appreciation of historical daily life and the advancements in household technology over time.

Primary Source Analysis

On the following pages are primary sources for teachers to review with their students. As you review the materials, promote student inquiry. Be sure to ask them about things that they notice or things that they wonder. You may also ask students about the author's purpose, how this source ties into what they have learned in class or from prior knowledge.

Analyze a Photograph



Meet the photo.

What do you see?

Is the photo?

☐ BLACK
AND
WHITE

☐ COLOR

Is there a caption?

☐ YES

☐ NO

If so, what does the caption tell you?



Observe its parts.

Circle what you see in the photo.



PEOPLE



OBJECTS



BOTH

What are the people doing in the photo?

What are the objects used for in the photo?

Write two words that describe the photo.

Try to make sense of it.

Who do you think took this photo?

Where do you think this photo was taken?

List something that helps you prove where it was taken.

Why do you think the photo was taken?

How does this photo compare to modern times?

Use it as historical evidence.

Where do you think you could find out more information about the people or objects in the photo?



Image ~ "Woman Ironing at Table"



Queen, J. F. *Woman ironing at table*, drawing on paper, December 11, 1857. Library of Congress, accessed October 8, 2024, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2009632626/>.

Analyze a Written Document



Meet the document.

Are there any special markings on the document? Circle all that apply.



STAMP



POSTMARK



HANDWRITTEN
NOTE



OFFICIAL
SEAL



SPECIAL
LETTERHEAD



OTHER

Is it handwritten or typed?



BOTH

Write down any words that you don't know. Then look up the definitions.



Try to make sense of it.

What is the main idea of the document?

List two quotes (words from the document) that help support the main idea.

Observe its parts.

Who wrote this document?

What is the date of the document?

Who read or received this document?



Use it as historical evidence.

Where do you think you could find out more information about the persons who wrote or received this document?

Where do you think you could find out more information about this event?



Document ~ Soap Making

Soap used for washing clothes, work garments, dishes and many things about the house was made at home by the housewife. First, we built an ash hopper in which to accumulate ashes to get lye to use in making the soap. This hopper was a large V-shaped trough. The sides were constructed of hand split boards about three or four feet long, put together so that ashes or water would not pass through.

The bottom of the V rested in a small trough made from a hollowed out tree trunk. The hopper was supported at the four upper corners by posts made from small tree trunks. Ashes from the oak, hickory, and ash wood burned in the big fireplace in the house during the winter were put into this hopper until it was almost full. There was always an abundant supply of these hardwoods, even black walnut, I am sorry to say, for our fireplace, cut while clearing new ground and stacked just outside the yard fence around our house. Pine wood was used in the cook stove but the ashes were not saved as they did not make good lye.

For months the family saved all meat scraps, fats and skins and put them in a large earthen crock kept covered in the smoke house. When my mother was ready to make soap she had us start pouring water over the ashes in the hopper. We poured two or three buckets at a time, several times each day for several days. After the hopper had been watered for about twenty-four hours, lye would begin to trickle out of the trough at the bottom and into a vessel that had been set to catch it.

Two kinds of soap were made, soft and semi-hard. The soft soap was made by putting a large amount of the saved meat scraps, skins, waste grease such as bacon drippings and rancid lard from the year before, etc., into the large wash pot in the yard with the proper amount of liquid lye from the ash hopper. A steady fire was maintained under this and it was frequently stirred for several hours until it was somewhat thickened like jelly. All the grease was by then changed and thoroughly mixed with the lye. After cooling it was dipped off into the large stone jars and stored in the smokehouse ready for use.

The semi-hard soap was made in a heavy vinegar bar-rel, called the soap barrel, in the smokehouse. This barrel was sunk almost half way down into that part of the floor of the smokehouse which had only the earthen floor. The soap grease, containing even ham bones, and the lye from the hopper were put together into the the barrel and stirred occasionally for a couple of weeks or so. When it began to solidify, the bones etc. were strained out and it was allowed to sit until it became rather hard. As soap was needed Mama or the girls took a small container to the smokehouse and brought in a supply. Later, when concentrated lye could be bought, harder and better soap could be made by using only the grease saved and extracted from scraps by cooking them (boiling in the wash pot and skimming off the fat after cooling.) To five pounds of this grease she added one can of lye. It was thoroughly stirred then allowed to sit over night when it became hard enough to cut into cakes.

No cooking other than by the lye was necessary for this.

Toilet soap was bought for facial or hand use and for baths.

Document ~ "Wanted to Hire,"

Wanted to Hire,
A NEGRO WOMAN, who is a good cook
and wash woman. Inquire at this office.
March 29, 1853. 47—tf.

"Wanted to Hire" *Arkansas State Gazette and Democrat*, July 15, 1853,
<https://www.newspapers.com/article/weekly-arkansas-gazette-wash-woman-arkan/156785379/>

Analyze an Artifact or Object



Meet the Artifact.

What do you think it is?

Observe its parts.

What do you think the object is made out of? Circle all that apply.



BONE



CERAMIC
POTTERY



FABRIC



GLASS



LEATHER



METAL



PAPER



PLASTIC



STONE



WOOD

How do you think the object feels?
Circle all that apply.



HEAVY



LIGHT



SMOOTH



ROUGH



HARD



SOFT

What is the color of the object?

What is the shape of the object?

What size is the object? Circle one.

SMALL

LIKE A

COIN

MEDIUM

LIKE A

BASKETBALL

LARGE

LIKE A

CAR

What are three words that describe the object?

Try to make sense of it.

What do you think the object was used for?

Who do you think would have used the object?

What does the object tell us about the time period when it was made and used?

Do we still use this object today? If so, how is it different?



Use it as historical evidence.

Where do you think you could find out more information about the object or the people who used it?



Artifact ~ Yoke & Smoothing Board



Yoke, 19th Century, Wood, Accession# 98.006.0005. Historic Arkansas Museum, Little Rock, AR.



Smoothing Board, 19th Century, Wood, Accession# 95.011.0001. Historic Arkansas Museum, Little Rock, AR.