**Intended Grade Level:** Middle School

**Lesson Purpose:**

Primary and secondary resources provide a valuable way to understand the past, but they do not provide definitive answers that students so often expect of them. Just like the scholars at Mount Vernon, students will analyze and make claims regarding slave life at Mount Vernon without having a correct answer. Students answer the question *“How many enslaved individuals named Grace, Isaac, and Suckey were there at Mount Vernon from 1750-1799?”*by examining and analyzing primary source evidence. As an optional extension, they can create a biography about one of the individuals identified.

**Lesson Objectives:**

* Students will use primary and secondary sources to learn about life as an enslaved person at Mount Vernon.
* Students will evaluate primary sources to make a claim about historical evidence and (optional extension) create a secondary source about an enslaved individual at Mount Vernon.
* Students will work in teams on a project that does not have a definitive final answer.

**Related Standards:**

* Research and Evidence Based Analysis
* Revolution and the New Nation
* Working in Teams
* Communicating
* Application of Knowledge through higher-order thinking skills
* Reading Standards in Technical Subjects
* Analyze how people’s perspectives influenced what information is available in the historical sources they created
* Evaluate the relevancy and utility of a historical source based on information such as maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose
* Develop claims and counterclaims while pointing out strengths and limitations of both.

**Teacher Preparation:**

This lesson works best in classrooms that have completed the following preparatory work:

* Define and model for students a practice of historical thinking strategies and provide context for how analyzing sources, such as the ones included in this lesson, is part of the overall practice of doing history. In developing this activity, Mount Vernon used the C3 Framework’s model of historical thinking. See page 43 of the C3 Frameworks: <http://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/c3/C3-Framework-for-Social-Studies.pdf>
* The topic of slavery and discussing the lives of people enslaved in the 18th century is an emotional topic in the classroom. Procedures for ensuring a safe and tolerant environment for open dialogue and engagement should be a part of classroom culture. Students should be reminded of this respectful environment that still encourages inquiry while participating in this lesson. Mount Vernon uses the Four Truths model of acknowledging and validating differing perspectives in our workshops. For more information, see page 110 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report: <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/finalreport/Volume%201.pdf>
* It is important that students are prepared to encounter unknown results when participating in this activity. Mount Vernon scholars have not determined a conclusive or “right” answer to how many Graces, Isaacs, and Suckeys were at Mount Vernon from 1750-1800. Preparing students for this ambiguous result is instructive for helping students understand the challenges and opportunities in historical thinking strategies.

**Warm-Up Activity:**

1. Review ground rules for discussing difficult topics like slavery, previously established in your classroom.
2. Instruct students complete the *Map of Mount Vernon* worksheet or complete a visual analysis using the image *A Map of General Washington’s Five Farms* as a class (worksheet and image are both included in the ZIP file download). The analysis should focus on identifying the five different farms that George Washington owned. These farms are the locations where the enslaved people he owned also lived.
3. Introduce Priscilla and Joe, two of the enslaved people who lived and worked on Washington’s farms. Instruct students to read *Excerpt:* *Biography of Priscilla* (included in ZIP file download) and/or watch Joe’s biographical video, available at: <http://www.mountvernon.org/education/for-students/meet-people-from-the-past/slammin-joe/>
4. Assign students to answer the following questions in a paragraph: “Imagine that you are an enslaved married couple living on the Dogue Run and Mansion House farms at Mount Vernon. What do you think your days are like? Would weekdays and weekends be different? Use your prior knowledge and the sources provided to answer the questions.”

Allow students time to explore the *Background Information* sheet (included in the ZIP file download) which includes links to online articles.

1. Inform students that historians were able to build the biographies of Priscilla, Joe, and other enslaved individuals who left no written record by using research skills that integrate numerous written records with what they know about Mount Vernon from archaeological, architectural, and curatorial work. As a class, you will be looking at the same evidence historians looked at to create our own narratives about the life of someone enslaved at Mount Vernon.

**Procedure:**

1. Review previously established steps to historical thinking strategies with students.
2. Show students the document and transcription titled *French’s Slave Census 1799* (included in the ZIP file download). Historians used this source, along with hundreds of letters, ledgers, farm reports, and other documents dated from 1750 to 1800, to find evidence of individual enslaved peoples’ names. As a class, locate Isaac on the census, then look for Grace. Ask students to find Suckey. *Note: Grace and Isaac are listed on the census, Suckey is not*. There were numerous enslaved people named Grace, Isaac, and Suckey who lived on Washington’s five farms; however, there is no record of exactly how many different individuals with those names there were over the 50 years that Washington held slaves.
3. Divide students into groups and provide each group with a set of sources found in the *Student Source Sets* folder (included in the ZIP file download). You can assign each group a complete set for Grace, Isaac, or Suckey; distribute a portion of each set (just the even or odd numbered cards for Grace, Isaac, or Suckey); or evenly divide one set of sources between your groups.

*Note: The Student Source Sets are simplified versions of a larger database created by Mount Vernon to explore the lives of the enslaved community. You can view this larger database here*: <http://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/slavery/slavery-database/>

1. Review the research question with students and provide starting tips to help the groups use their time with the sources wisely.

**Research Question: *How many enslaved individuals named Grace, Isaac, and Suckey were there at Mount Vernon from 1750-1799?***

1. Instruct student groups to review the pieces of evidence and sort their source cards into piles according to the number of individuals they think lived on Mount Vernon with the name they were assigned in their source set (each pile represents an individual and contains the source cards with evidence e.g. 5 piles for 5 Isaacs, etc). Refer to the *Starting and Stumbling Tips for Teachers* handout (included in the ZIP file download) for prompts to get students started with this activity.
2. Allow 20-30 minutes for groups to review evidence and fill out their *Student Worksheet* (included in the ZIP file download).
3. Instruct groups to present their findings and share with their peers if they reached consensus on the number of individuals with the name they were assigned. If there was no consensus, students should explain why they disagreed using evidence from the source set.
4. Conduct a class discussion centered on the results of the activity.

Suggested discussion prompts:

* + How much did you trust the sources available to you?
  + Where else could you find more information about the lives of those enslaved at Mount Vernon?
  + How do we find stories about people who did not leave a written record?
  + Do the stories of peoples’ lives change even when events of the past do not? What causes a story of the past to change?
  + If more than one group worked on the same document set, ask the groups to compare notes and analysis. Are they in agreement?

**Optional Extension Activity:**

The work students completed in the lesson above is part of the work that historians do: research and analysis. The other role of the historian is to create secondary sources based on their research that puts the pieces of evidence together in a narrative format. An example of this can be seen in Mount Vernon’s exhibit *Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington’s Mount Vernon*   
<http://www.mountvernon.org/plan-your-visit/calendar/exhibitions/lives-bound-together-slavery-at-george-washingtons-mount-vernon/>

This extension activity asks students to create a secondary source based on their research that pulls the pieces of evidence gathered in the activity above together in a narrative format.

1. Students can choose Grace, Isaac, or Suckey to create a narrative about a day in his/her life (act out, write, draw, create an exhibition panel, etc.). Where would they go, what would they do, who would they meet, what would they say?
2. Submit a list of sources to identify to the primary and secondary sources you used to support the narrative you create.
3. Create a classroom gallery walk, online space, or class period for students to share their historically sourced narratives with their peers and/or friends or family.