I. Background Information

Among George Washington’s many skills was an aptitude for mapping the land. Even his earliest surveys, done at age 16, show admirable accuracy and visual appeal. A 1748 surveying trip to the western lands of Lord Fairfax honed his skills and whetted his interest in the region. The lure of those western lands—as a place to challenge himself, to prove himself commissioned officer material, and most especially to make his fortune—continued throughout his life. The map made for his 1753 expedition, when he was sent by Governor Dinwiddie to carry English expulsion demands to the French, shows why.

Washington had already learned how quickly tobacco could exhaust the soil. He felt prosperity could be achieved through the regular exchange of goods with the rich lands of the interior, but that was not easily achieved. Between the Ohio Valley and his Mt. Vernon home lay not only representatives of competing nations, both native and foreign, but hundreds of miles of near impenetrable wilderness, “Endless Mountains”, and rivers closed to easy navigation by uneven water flow and rocky falls.

Washington was undeterred. By the 1770s, he was the owner of thousands of acres in the Shenandoah and Ohio Valleys, some purchased, some granted by the governor to veterans of service against the French. Washington himself had established a rough track to the Ohio Valley as far back as 1754, but land travel would never be adequate for significant trade. He became enamored with the idea of a Potomac canal project that would bypass the rapids which barred easy passage.

In the end, the canal, difficult to build and with a variable water supply making it unusable for heavy loads more than a month or two a year, did not secure Washington’s fortune. It did, however, tie the western lands to the rest of the country long enough for a larger nation to form.

II. Materials

A. Documents regarding the appeal of the West
   ★ Mississippi Land Company, Petition to the King, December, 1768
   ★ George Washington, Letter to John Posey, June 24, 1767

B. Map from Washington’s Journal

C. Documents regarding the peoples occupying the West
   ★ George Washington, Letter to William Crawford, July 25, 1767
   ★ George Washington, Letter to Benjamin Harrison, October 10, 1784

D. Documents regarding the Potomac Canal
   ★ Semple Proposal for Potomac Navigation, 1769
III. Lesson Activities
Students will use quotes from Washington and others and a map published with the journal of his 1754 expedition to the French to draw conclusions about 1) the significance of the western lands to Washington and the country and 2) the problems involved in tapping their resources.

A. Distribute Student Handout #1 to be read for homework. The following day have the students create a poster promoting the West and access to it, using brief phrases from the reading.

B. Distribute copies of the journal map (Student Handout #2) and a classroom atlas or textbook map. Have the students use a marker to underline the following towns—Philadelphia, Fredericksburg, and Winchester, then to mark in the future sites of Richmond, Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Louisville—all on rivers. Finally, the students can make a list of all the reasons they can think of that a river site was so important.

C. A fall line connects the points on parallel rivers where waterfalls and rapids begin. The falls occur where the underlying geology changes (in the Eastern U.S., from the hard rock of the Appalachian Piedmont to the softer Coastal Plain). Ask the students why a fall line, while not conducive to easy passage, was nonetheless an attractive site for a town (as was the case for Richmond and Louisville). Answers might include mill power, the basis for a trade center where travellers had to stop to portage, and an exchange point for products coming from different environments on either side of the falls. Have them work in small groups to lay out a town at a fall site. You may wish to use the excellent article on Washington and the “Patowmack” Canal in the June, 1987, National Geographic.

D. Have the students mark in the site of Mt. Vernon (roughly where the Potomac line on the map stops at the 77° 35′ longitude line). Using the map, Student Handout #2, and the quotes on Student Handout #3, have them list the obstacles to Washington’s utilization of goods from his Shenandoah and Ohio Valley properties. Again, the National Geographic article can be helpful, especially for the location of falls on the river. They can then prepare a “letter from George” in which he attempts to convince a friend to invest in the canal company.

E. The students can evaluate the map’s accuracy by comparing it to a map in the textbook or a classroom atlas. Is the scale correct? They should next mark in Washington’s route on the 1754 trip. It is visible as a straight line starting at Winchester and reaching as far north as the French fort on Lake Erie. You can point that out or, better yet, get the complete text of the journal in Washington Writings, edited by John Rhodehamel (Library of America, 1997, p. 17) and have students mark the route as they read. They can then lay a string on the route and
use it to compute the distance travelled based on their previously established scale. How long did the expedition take? Deleting time for the various meetings described in the text, how many miles were covered in the average day?

F. Have the students read the documents on Student Handbook #4 and research Washington’s involvement in the Ohio Company and in selection of land for veterans as well as his (and others’) efforts to protect those interests through influencing public policy. The students can then write a “Special Counsel’s Opinion” on whether or not a conflict of interest existed.

IV. While Touring the Exhibit
Point out Item 70, a drawing of a newly cleared farm.


After the Revolution, pioneers poured into the frontier lands of the West, carving out farms and adding new states to the Union. George Washington had promoted the development of the West for fifty years. As private citizen, and later as president, Washington did all he could to encourage the settlement of Indian lands.

Consider what establishing a farm in the wilderness would have entailed. Note conflicts with the Indians (See Items 106 and 107.).


President Washington gave a delegation of Miami Indians this proclamation committing the United States to protect the tribe’s lands. But despite the promises, soon there would be no Miami people living on the banks of the Wabash River. Like the other native peoples of the Ohio Valley, the Miamis would be dispossessed.


President Washington promised friendship and federal protection to a delegate of Miami Indians who called on him in Philadelphia. But he also gave them this letter and the naked threat that it contained “ Most of you have been on a long Journey to the Eastward where you have seen the numbers and Strength of a part of the United States. But you have seen only a part . . . . Judge then, what the bad Indians may expect in the end if they will not harken to the voice of peace!”
V. Extended Lesson Ideas
★ Students can use the Library of America text of Washington’s 1748 journal in conjunction with the map to investigate another influential journey in Washington’s life. The text is very readable and full of descriptions that will intrigue them.
★ There are a number of good research topics related to the subject of these lessons, including canal boat construction and travel, lock construction, and cultural practices of the various peoples living in the West.
DOCUMENTS REGARDING THE APPEAL OF THE WEST

Mississippi Land Company, Petition to the King, December, 1768

George Washington invested in this land company.

★★★★★

The increase of People, the Extension of Trade, and the Enlargement of the Revenue are, with certainty, to be Expected, where the Fertility of the Soil, the mildness of the Climate, and the Attainment of Lands on easy Terms, invite Emigrants to settle, and Cultivate those Commodities most wanted by Great Britain, and which will bear the charge of a tedious Navigation, by their Great Value; such as Hemp, Flax, Silk, Wine, potash, Cochineal[,] Indigo &c. By these means, the Mother Country will be supplyed with many necessary materials, which are now purchased from Foreigners at a very great Expence . . .

★★★★★

George Washington, Letter to John Posey, June 24, 1767

... see what Fortunes were made . . . how the greatest Estates we have in this Colony were made; Was it not by taking up & purchasing at very low rates the rich back Lands which were thought nothing of in those days, but are now the most valuable Lands we possess?
DOCUMENTS REGARDING THE PEOPLE’S OCCUPYING THE WEST

George Washington, Letter to William Crawford, July 25, 1767

. . . The other matter just now hinted at and which I proposd in my last is to join you in attempting to secure some of the most valuable Lands in the Kings part which I think may be accomplished after a while notwithstanding the Proclamation that restrains it at present & prohibits the Settling of them at all for I can never look upon that Proclamation in any other light (but this I say between ourselves) than as a temporary expedient to quiet the minds of the Indians & must fall of course in a few years especially when those Indians are consenting to our Occupying the Lands. any Person therefore who neglects the present oppertunity of hunting out good Lands & in some measure Marking & distinguishing them for their own (in order to keep others from settling them) will never regain it.

George Washington, Letter to Benjamin Harrison, October 10, 1784

. . . I need not remark to you Sir, that the flanks and rear of the United States are possessed by other powers, and formidable ones too; nor, how necessary it is to apply the cement of interest, to bind all parts of the Union together by indissoluble bonds—especially that part of it, which lies immediately west of us, with the middle States . . .

. . . the Western Inhabitants wou’d . . . meet us at least half way, rather than be driven into the arms of, or be made dependant upon foreigners; which would, eventually, either bring on a separation of them from us, or a war between the United States & one or the other of those powers—most probably with the Spaniards.
DOCUMENTS REGARDING THE POTOMAC CANAL

Semple Proposal for Potomac Navigation, 1769

. . . It is hoped that an application to the Legislature in a work of so publick a nature will not at present be thought unseasonable or impertinent. The vast bodies of land now Ceded to us by the Indians must open a new and extensive field of Commerce, of which the River Potomac must Necessarily be the principall Channel, not to mention the very lucrative Skin and furr Trade which this must make our own whenever we chuse to make Use of it.


. . . Mr Ballendine to shew you the Plan also; as he has met with pretty considerable incouragement on this side the Potowmack, and has got Letters (as he says) from Lord Dunmore to Mr Brinley, & other’s, from whom he expects the Insight necessary to enable him to be instrumental in carrying into execution the present attempt of extending the Navigation of Potomack from Tidewater upwards, as far as Fort Cumberland . . .

. . . because, I think the opening of the Potomack will at once fix the Trade of the Western Country (at least till it may be conducted through the Mississippi, by New Orleans) through that Channel and end, in amazing advantages to these two Colonies . . .