

Thomas Barry
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Teaching the Myth and Reality of American Icons: George Washington and Daniel Boone

He was born into colonial America and as a young man spent time in the wilderness, surveyed land, and interacted with Indians. He had little formal education yet as a result of his industriousness, self-education and ingenuity he accumulated land, wealth, and the admiration of his peers. He survived Braddock's defeat during the French and Indian War and was elected to public office in Virginia several times. He fought in the Revolutionary War where he enjoyed success and endured defeat. He was happiest when he was on the land but reluctantly assumed leadership positions when the public demanded it. He was tolerant of others and a believer in Divine Providence. After he had retired, grown old, and died, books were written about his life that elevated him to the mythical status of American hero. Certainly the man described is George Washington. Yes and no. It is actually two, George Washington and Daniel Boone.

George Washington and Daniel Boone were extraordinary men who have for more than two centuries captivated the imagination and admiration of people as part and parcel of American history and culture. Both have cities, counties, and streets named after them and most people would probably claim to know at least something about them. However, much of what people believe to be fact about Washington and Boone is rooted in fiction. Scholarship has revealed that Washington's famous admittance to his barking of the cherry tree never happened. For that matter, neither did his prayer at Valley Forge, the slinging of the coin across the Rappahannock or his addition of the words "so help me God" to the presidential oath. Likewise, we now know that Daniel Boone never wore a coonskin cap nor did he discover the Cumberland Gap, coin the term "elbow room", or wrestle five hundred pound bears with his bare hands.

So what are people, and especially students, to make of these two extraordinary men? Do they deserve the credit they are given in history classes and popular culture if some of what people believe about them is untrue? More importantly, how should teachers present these men to their students? Behind their mythical exteriors George Washington and Daniel Boone were real men who greatly impacted the development of

the United States. However, their reality becomes obscured and suspect when the myths are removed. This creates a situation for students similar to one of the great questions posed during the Scientific Revolution, if the Bible is wrong about the make up of the universe, what else is it wrong about? Perhaps it was inevitable that the myths that for so many years propped these men up would someday be debunked and lead to their reality being put to the test. Regardless, the only real solution to teaching and evaluating the myth and reality of men like Washington and Boone lies in a balanced approach where students are given a variety of sources and perspectives that allow them to arrive at rational assessments of their own.

Part of this balanced approach is an explanation of the myths origins. For Washington they originate from Mason Locke Weems's "The Life of George Washington," whereas Boone's legend owes much to John Filson's "The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke" and its chapter entitled, "The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon."¹ Weems and Filson litter their accounts with contestable and downright false information, but they wrote in an era when, as Daniel Boorstin suggests, America thirsted for heroic figures. Boone biographer Robert Morgan certainly echoed Boorstin when he wrote, "The young republic needed Boone, the icon of curiosity, courage, character, and wonder" (Morgan, 447). In addition to hero seeking, this was an era when writing was often used as a teaching tool to illustrate lessons on morality. Weems' continually illustrated Washington's morality through his honesty and virtue while Filson filled his account with descriptions of Boone's humility, courage, and wisdom. Although the myth busting might disappoint some students, they will at least be provided with a more accurate picture of the meaning behind the myths and will understand the perspective of the authors, giving them a unique and valuable view into that time period.

When next examining the reality, students may actually be more disappointed to learn that the great General Washington was not exactly a tactical military genius and suffered several defeats or that Boone was a atrocious speller, found himself in court several times over land disputes, and was even court-martialed once. In many instances

¹ Ironically, Filson's attempts to publish a second edition were only cancelled after George Washington did not give his endorsement because a map of Kentucky the edition contained did not meet his standards for geometric correctness.

the reality is more amazing than the myth. For example, in Braddock's defeat Washington narrowly avoided death after he had several bullets pass through his clothing and had multiple horses shot out from under him. Equally remarkable, Boone once tracked a group of Indian kidnappers for several days through the wilderness to dramatically rescue his daughter and two of her friends who had been taken prisoner. Examining the factual record is part of the balance that evolves beyond the simple debunking of myths and can include exciting moments in Washington and Boone's lives to capture the attention of students.

Educational pedagogy today focuses on multiple interpretation, continual re-evaluation, and critical inquiry. This makes men like Washington and Boone prime targets for criticism, as their real stories are re-evaluated using modern standards. This reassessment raises interesting questions for students to consider. If Washington fought and risked everything for liberty and freedom how is it possible that he remained a slave owner until the day he died? If Boone believed in self-determination and admired Indian culture how could he almost single-handedly pave the way for the rapid extermination of that culture by leading settlers to Kentucky? These are legitimate questions that generate terrific debate. However, they also obligate teachers to present a balanced view that allows their students to arrive at informed conclusions. A balanced teaching approach will explore how Washington's sentiments about slavery evolved throughout his life and how he freed his slaves in his will, a remarkably progressive thing to do in his day and age. After all, fellow founding father and mythical man in his own right Thomas Jefferson cannot say the same. Likewise students should closely examine Boone's relationships with Indians and try to figure out how his great admiration for Indians contrasts with the fact that Indians had killed two of his sons and one of his brothers.

Offering explanations for criticisms of Washington and Boone should not be confused with defensiveness, as neither man should not be immune to criticism. Both certainly received their fair share during their lives. Benjamin Franklin Bache's *Aurora* published scathing articles about Washington that celebrated his retirement from the presidency by stating: "If ever a nation was debauched by a man, the American nation has been by Washington," and "...if ever there was a period for rejoicing, it is this moment" (Wecter, 28). Thomas Jefferson even alluded that Washington was going senile

during their falling out. Similarly, Boone was accused of being pro-British while fighting in the Revolution and was relentlessly chastised about his intimacy with Indians. He was even given the label “white-Indian” to which Boone would almost certainly have been flattered had the intention been different.

Continual re-evaluation when studying historical figures has opened the floodgates to extensive scrutiny and criticism. One possible outcome of this magnified scrutiny is the reduction of the celebrated stature of men like Washington and Boone. This is another crucial reason why it is necessary that teachers present balanced information to their students. For example, during the Revolutionary War Washington ordered the army to raze and obliterate Seneca villages in western New York. On the surface this seems vicious and perhaps even genocidal. Yet if students are not told that the Seneca had allied with the British and were fighting against Washington there can be little doubt that students will have a less than favorable (or accurate) view of Washington. Likewise, if students learn about Daniel Boone’s participation in raiding missions bent on the destruction of Shawnee villages throughout Ohio the same possibility exists. Thus, teachers need to constantly be aware of the perspectives of the resources they issue to students.

It can be dangerous and counterproductive if teachers focus solely on these negative interpretations of Washington and Boone. Teachers should certainly not ignore negative views nor should they obscure the questionable moments in Washington and Boone’s lives. By exploring and uncovering historical figures’ weaknesses and personal failures students can see that they were *real* people. However, when teachers focus only on the “dark side” the accomplishments of exceptional people be cheapened and diminished. This would not bother Howard Zinn who disapproves of the portrayals of Washington and Boone as American heroes. Although Zinn does not write very much about Washington he does depict him as a white, elite, and wealthy man who only acted in his own self-interest. Zinn does not include Boone in his writing but he would likely depict him as Columbus-incarnate. These types of depictions serve as more evidence about the importance of balance. The teacher who harps solely on the negative aspects does just as much of a disservice to their students as the teacher that only presents the great accomplishments of these men.

Washington and Boone are integral parts of the story of the United States. As the nation has grown their influence has affected western expansion, popular culture and even literature. Longfellow's poems about Washington are still widely studied and Boone was James Fenimore Cooper's inspiration for several of his most celebrated characters. It is further remarkable that Washington and Boone continue to influence modern society and students should examine both the myths and reality about them. Myth and reality can coexist in educational settings. To ignore sources like Weems and Filson would be unfortunate since they offer unique perspectives for students to view heroic figures through a historical lens. Also, in myth a great person's true character can sometimes shine through. Perhaps Dixon Wecter was accurate when he wrote about the cherry tree story, "the real Washington's refusal to flinch from responsibility of manhood, under his supreme sense of duty, lends a touch of veracity to the absurd yarn" (Wecter, 35). When compared to reality, even if a student comes to the conclusion that Washington and Boone were not as great as they had thought, they can still learn several life lessons.

A central theme of discussion throughout this seminar has been how teachers can educate students about Washington's unique role in American history and the question of whether myths spoil the unblemished image students have of their national heroes. Considering that both Washington and Boone have stood the test of time it appears that their greatness based in reality outweighs that which is based on myth. They have weathered the storm of having their personal, political, and professional careers dissected and remain revered figures that continue to teach students lessons about the importance of character, perseverance, devotion to duty and loved ones, honesty, patience, courage, endurance, determination, and tolerance amongst many others.

In-depth and balanced study of Washington and Boone's lives can also provide students with insight into the trials and tribulations of early American life that they can apply to modern times and themselves. Students are at a point in their lives where they are setting out into uncharted territory, not knowing what to expect. They can look to Washington and Boone as examples since both were trailblazers in their own right. Learning about their life long struggles to determine their identities may encourage students to learn more about American leaders in greater depth and help them gain a better understanding of their own place as American citizens. Both George Washington

and Daniel Boone were indeed great men and deserve their fair share of praise for the exceptional lives they lived. They were also human beings who made mistakes and suffered many great failures yet their great accomplishments remain even after their myths were debunked and their real lives thoroughly examined. When students learn about them through a balanced approach that blends myth, reality and a critical analysis of their triumphs and downfalls, students can truly learn a great deal about two great American icons.

Works Consulted

Morgan, Robert. *Boone*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin Books, 2007.

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NEH Readings Book:

Daniel Boorstin, "The Mythologizing of George Washington."

Dixon Wecter, "President Washington and Parson Weems."