Native American Gender Roles in Maryland

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Grade Level: Upper Elementary
Duration of lesson: 1 period
Overview:

To European eyes, the structure of Native American society lacked the complexity of their own community. Yet, their own drawings of the Powhatan people reveal that the tribes' division of labor and gender roles were actually very advanced, especially where the status of women was concerned. Whereas married women in Europe held few rights to their property, family wealth, or even children, women of the Eastern Woodland tribes had much greater power and autonomy over their produce, conditions of labor, and property. Native women even served as representatives in the tribal councils, and held rights over the land they worked. This lesson demonstrates that although "women's work" was belittled in European cultures, Native women's daily contributions were recognized by Native men and the tribe as a whole as vital to the prosperity of the community and worthy of respect. By comparing the condition of women in America and other lands (including colonists), students will discover that women's status in their community was directly related to the social hierarchy, religious culture, and natural environment in which they lived, and that the combination of those ingredients varied wildly across the continents.

Related National History Standards:
Content Standards:

Era 1: Three Worlds Meet (Beginnings to 1620)

Standard 1: Comparative characteristics of societies in the Americas, Western Europe, and Western Africa that increasingly interacted after 1450

Historical Thinking Standards:

Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

D. Evidence historical perspectives.
G. Draw upon visual, literary, and musical sources.

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

B. Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions.

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will identify the roles of men, women, and children in the culture of Maryland Woodland Indians.
- Students will apply the roles of men, women, and children when examining the ways that the Maryland Woodland Indians met their economic wants.

Topic Background

It is a challenge to find historical source material from the viewpoint of Native people. The only surviving images and written records were created by Europeans for their own people. These documents often provide us with more reliable information about the Europeans themselves, than about the people they encountered upon their arrival in the New World (Richter 2001, 110). However, several sixteenth-century drawings, while created for Europeans, do provide an eyewitness account of Native Americans that offsets the endless stereotypical images elementary students have seen over the years in books, television, and movies: *savage* men with bows and arrows riding away from their tepees to hunt the buffalo and women and children picking berries near the village.

In 1585, artist and cartographer John White accompanied the voyage from England to North Carolina's Outer Banks to settle 'Virginia' as a part of Sir Walter Raleigh's plan. White spent about thirteen months at Roanoke Island before returning to England for more supplies. During this period he made over seventy watercolor drawings of indigenous peoples, plants, and animals. As historian Daniel Richter suggested, the purpose of White's drawings was to give those back in Europe an accurate idea of the inhabitants and environment in the New World. In 1590, Theodore DeBry made engravings from White's drawings (Hulton 1984). In his engravings, DeBry took certain liberties with White's images. By examining both sets of pictures it is possible to use them as a resource to study English views of native people, as well as gender roles among the Indians themselves.

Most accounts of Powhatan Indians focus on men's roles in society. This emphasis is due in part to the fact that the male English eyewitnesses came from a patriarchal culture, that their observations were documented for purposes of surveillance (after all, Europeans deeply mistrusted the Natives) and thus focused on the activities of men, and that the European observers were not accustomed to talking freely with women of other cultures. But scholars have found ways to work around the biases of sources. Using ethnographic analogy (a technique based on the principle that two cultures that have some basic similarities may have similarities in related areas of life) , reconstructive ethnobotany (using an area's plant life to determine nutritional matters and seasonal movement), and living history, cultural anthropologists have been able to come to significant conclusions about life for Powhatan women (Rountree 1998, 2-3). Those methodological tools have enabled scholars to take a closer look into Woodland Indian culture in the Chesapeake region. What they found was that the tasks assigned women indicate that they were physically capable and enjoyed high status in their culture. The active work that men, women, and children undertook outdoors all day necessitated non-tailored clothing and a strong physical condition. Men and boys hunted, trapped fish, cleared fields, and burned and scraped tree trunks to make canoes. Boys gathered mussels and acted as scarecrows in the fields. Both sexes were experts at handling canoes and shared the responsibility of preparing shells and beads as valuable forms of

payment. Children helped in any way they could, such as helping women build homes by handing them materials.

The daily work of women was scheduled the night before by the women themselves and was conducted in groups that included small children and babies carried on cradleboards. Women planted and weeded fields, harvested and processed corn and beans, gathered berries and greens, and gathered firewood. Such activities required women to move in and out of the village, frequently carrying heavy loads and placing themselves in danger of enemy attacks. Women were caregivers, cooked and baked, butchered animals, gutted fish, built clay pots, built homes, and twined cordage for baskets, mats, shingles, covers, and rugs. Tanning hides, separating tendons to make sinew-thread for sewing, making feather mantles, producing puccoon (roots reduced to powder and mixed with grease to make body paint), and chiseling tools out of wood were women's tasks. In addition, women were responsible for getting Tuckahoe, an arduous task requiring the digging of roots and transporting them via canoes that required three women to paddle. Women and girls used mortar and pestle to pound Tuckahoe into flour. When needed, they aided in the canoe making process. Finally, women served as nurses, barbers, artists, and embroiderers (Rountree 1998, 17).

English colonists made their first permanent settlement in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607. The English believed in a gender hierarchy in which male domination of women was critical to preserving social order. Men's power over women was compared to the power of a monarchy over its people (Brown 1995, 28). English men were responsible for cultivation through plow agriculture. English men owned the land, while English women did so only when no husband or father remained. English women were responsible for the domestic production of dairying, brewing, and spinning as well as all gardening. Women only worked in the fields when there was a pressing need, such as during harvesting. The English ideal of female conduct was to maintain a modest demeanor. Their primary role was domestic. Men's primary role was economic, and they were to conduct themselves with assertiveness and always with authority over women.

The Virginia Algonquian's division of labor was based on the concept of males as 'warrior gods' and females as sustainers of life. Women provided seventy-five percent of the calories consumed by Natives (Brown 1995, 29). Native women were agriculturalists and owned the fields. They produced corn, chose spouses, and preserved family property as well. The roles of Native women gave them great influence in making decisions, such as when and where their people should move and when to commence planting. With women as the producers and caretakers of property, both political power and ancestry wealth was passed through the female line. While Native women were associated with the giving of life, men were associated with life taking. The primary roles of men were to serve as hunters and protectors.

The significant differences in Algonquian-English gender roles shaped the perceptions and interactions of both groups. Differing agricultural roles of women in these two cultures led the English to view the Native males as failures in providing for their people. English observers further questioned the ability of

Native men to provide economically for their people, based on the fact that Native men did not seem to own property and that densely populated towns had not been developed. The English did not understand that Indians owned property communally rather than individually, and that many in fact lived in quite large towns. English fashion and appearance further strengthened the European theory of Native men's weakened power. Facial hair was considered a sign of male maturity for the English, who considered Native men's clean-shaven faces as lacking in manhood. The idea that Native men allowed their women to shave their faces exemplified men's weakened authority over their women in the eyes of the settlers. In addition, the settlers found men's body adornment to be feminine and women's attire far too immodest. These differing customs led the English to view Natives as 'savages,' the men as weak, and the women as overly burdened by the weaknesses of their men (Brown 1995).

Through a look at Native women in Western Canada during the expansion of the fur trade in the eighteenth century, historian Sylvia VanKirk offers additional evidence of the importance of Native women to the economic life of their villages. Like their counterparts in Virginia, these women possessed crucial skills and knowledge of the wilderness that led them to play a vital role in basic survival. Native women in Canada made snowshoes and moccasins, and manufactured pemmican (dried meat pounded fine, often mixed with fat) to sustain Indian and European traders on long hunts. Additional contributions to diet provided by the native women included collecting berries and wild rice, and making maple sugar. Men relied upon women for the collection of spruce roots for sewing canoe seams and spruce gum for caulking canoes, as well as for their expert paddling and steering of canoes.

In addition to such domestic roles, Native women, both in Western Canada and elsewhere, periodically acted as diplomats, peacemakers, and trade negotiators (VanKirk 1984, 9). The high status of Native women within their societies compared to their European counterparts was evident in their marital relations. Fur traders frequently paid a price to take a Native bride and the consent of Native women had to be secured before marriage. These Native wives were considered to be economic partners of their European husbands. Indian wives provided fur traders with the opportunity to be drawn into Indian kinship circle, giving them access to trade posts and assistance in trade operations. While it is apparent through all of the evidence that Native women played a central position in the labor force, like many Native women elsewhere in North America, the importance of their roles is frequently forgotten or underestimated (Van Kirk 1984, 10-11).

Historian Colin Calloway provides yet further support of high status of women in Native American society in a statement reflecting Iroquoian belief:

> Many Indian societies also accorded women and children a measure of respect unusual in Europe. In societies where women produced food as well as prepared it, their economic role seems to have translated into higher status than that of their European or colonial counterparts. Iroquoian women in particular exerted an influence undreamed of by

> Europeans. “All real authority is vested in them,” wrote Joseph Francois Lafitau in the seventeenth century. “The land, the fields, and their harvest all belong to them. They are the souls of the Councils and the arbiters of war and peace…..The children are the domain, and it is through their blood that the order of the succession is transmitted.” While women gave and sustained life, raising crops and rearing children in villages, men took life, fighting and hunting away from the villages. (Calloway 1997, 191)

Curriculum confines and time restrictions prevent a more extensive historical investigation into the differences between Native and European gender roles during initial contact and subsequent colonization of the ‘New World.’ However, even with this short introduction, it will be clear that the primary source images in this lesson will help students to analyze the interests and values of the various people involved, talk about how they differed, and in the process of interpreting the images become active historians.

Annotated Bibliography:

Brown, Kathleen M. “The Anglo-Algonquian Gender Frontier.” In *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women*, ed. Nancy Shoemaker (New York: Routledge, 1995), 26-48.

This article focuses on early Algonquian-English relations beginning in 1607 when colonists made their first permanent settlement in Jamestown. Brown investigates how differences in gender roles shaped the perceptions and interactions of both groups.

Calloway, Colin G. *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

Calloway discusses the high status of the economic role of Native women before contact with Europeans versus the status of women in Europe during the same period.

Hulton, Paul. *America 1585: The Complete Drawings of John White*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.

Hulton presents valuable historic summaries, as well as his annotations for John White’s drawings. This source also provides a brief history of English colonization, detailed accounts of the Roanoke colony, a biography of John White, and Hulton’s views of the meaning and influence of White’s drawings.

Richter, Daniel K. *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America*.
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Chapter Four of this text examines the limited sources historians have obtained that represent the voices of Native Americans during the time of American colonization.

Rountree, Helen C. “Powhatan Indian Women: The People Captain John Smith Barely
Saw.” *Ethnohistory* 45, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 1-29.

This essay provides the missing information to most eyewitness accounts of Powhatan Indians that focus on the men’s role in society. Rountree completes the picture of the separation of tasks based upon gender in Woodland Indian culture, emphasizing women’s roles and responsibilities through her descriptions of various work groups one might find in a typical Native village in the Chesapeake region.

Van Kirk, Sylvia. “The Role of Native Women in the Fur Trade Society of Western Canada, 1670-1830.” *Frontiers* VII, no. 3 (1984): 9-13.

While this article provides content regarding Western Canada, it offers additional background information about the role of Native Women as far back as 1670. The roles Native women played in the early days of the fur trade indicate the tasks they had mastered, the contributions they made to, and the position they had secured in society.

VanSledright, Bruce. *In Search of America’s Past: Learning to Read History in Elementary School*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2002.

VanSledright provides the research and rationale behind the use of investigative, inquiry-based approaches to the study of history at the elementary school level. VanSledright’s study of fifth grade students provides the evidence that having students conduct historic investigations works and inspire students to discover that history rests not in the past; but as historians, they play active roles that influence their decisions today and in the future.

Vocabulary

Economic needs: goods and services bought for essential survival: food, shelter and clothing

Economic wants: goods and services bought for pleasure or comfort

Specialization: The production of a narrower range of goods and services than is consumed by an individual or group.

Teaching Procedures

1. Conduct a visual imagery exercise by asking students to get comfortable and close their eyes. Have them imagine going back in time to when Europeans first came to Maryland. Ask them to picture coming upon a village of Native Americans. Ask:

   How do you the men, women, boys and girls look?

   What do you see each of these groups doing?

2. Discuss with students the concept of gender roles. Explain that we will be looking today at the way that tasks were divided based on gender and age among Native American Woodland tribes.

3. Have students complete Resource Sheet #1, "Native American Gender Roles in Maryland: Predictions" by recording the tasks they envision the different group members performing.

   Discuss student responses to questions proposed in the visual imagery exercise. Ask:

   How can we find out about the roles each group within Native villages at the time played? List student responses on the chalkboard. Reponses may include reading in the text, researching at the library or through the Internet, and finding pictures from the time. Students may suggest ideas such as "talking to people", which may lead into a quick discussion about whether people from that time would still be alive today, and whether or not there is first person written history from that time period.

4. Assign students to groups of four. Distribute Resource Sheet #2, "Native American Gender Roles in Maryland: A Second Look," and Resource Sheet #3, "Images of Woodland Indians." Students should examine these images in their groups to draw conclusions about the roles of men, women, girls, and boys in Woodland Indian society. Have students record their conclusions on Resource Sheet #2.

5. Distribute Resource Sheet #4, "Powhatan Gender Roles." Each student will read one of the parts of this resource sheet. As students read they should record information about gender roles on Resource Sheet #2.

   Allow each member of the group time to share what they have learned with the rest of the group. Students should add new information shared by their fellow group members to their notes on Resource Sheet #2.

6. Return to student responses to questions proposed in the motivational visual imagery exercise. Through a discussion, students will cross out any inaccurate assumptions about Indian men, women, boys, and girls listed on Resource Sheet #1 and identify the accurate specialized roles of Woodland Indians. The teacher will then revisit the objective and ask students to explain how Woodland Indians used specialized roles to meet their economic wants and needs.

7. As a tool to assess student understanding have draw a scene that shows men, women, boys, and girls working cooperatively at jobs in a Woodland Indian village. They must label each of the four tribe members and the specialized job shown in their picture. A short caption that explains one accurate role for each of the men, women, boys, and girls should accompany the illustration. They may use notes taken on Resource Sheet #2 to assist them in completing the assessment. Assessments will be collected and scored.

8. Potential extension activities include:

   Provide a resource sheet of information about the gender roles of Europeans at the time of the White images. Have students complete a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the differing gender roles between these two cultures.

   Have the students further explore perspective through any number of scenarios, such as having a pair of students act out a scene arguing over a pencil or other object. Have the kids retell the event from each of the two character's point of view. Students should compare the two viewpoints and discuss how varying perspectives affected what each student experienced. Also discuss how differing audiences may affect the students' retelling, whether it is for their classmates, the teacher, a parent, or an administrator.

   Have students look at the water colors by John White and the engravings by Theodor DeBry available at http://www.virtualjamestown.org/images/white_debry_html/jamestown.html. Students should compare the water colors and the engravings.