



Michie
TAVERN

Lesson Plan & Resource Material

A Brief History of the Michie Family and their Tavern

“Scotch John” Michie was born in Scotland. He set sail for Virginia in 1716 aboard the ship the “Elizabeth and Anne” of Liverpool, England. He came to America after being captured in the 1715 Scottish uprising against the English Crown. This rebellion was not successful and all prisoners were either sent to Virginia or put to death. John Michie and his friend James Watson were among those fortunate enough to be sent to America.

Although he arrived in America with nothing, John Michie worked hard and prospered. He moved westward across Virginia and in 1746 he purchased land in what is now Albemarle County.

By the 1770’s, John Michie had acquired an estate of over 11,000 acres. He and his wife, Mary, had 11 children. Three of his sons were living on tracts of John Michie’s property and had made improvements to the land. In 1777, one of these sons, William, was away fighting in the American Revolution.

Corporal William Michie was at Valley Forge when he received an urgent message to return home. He arrived in Virginia only to learn that his ailing father had passed on. In 1779, after three years of service, William Michie was discharged from the army.

Back in Virginia, William lived on the land that his father had bequeathed to him. Here he ran a plantation and grew both wheat and tobacco. His land was on the Buck Mountain road, a busy stagecoach route. Travelers along this road often needed a place to spend the night, so in 1784, William Michie received a license to operate a tavern. By law, innkeepers were required to provide food, drink and a place to sleep, at prices fixed by the local government.

In the 18th century, tavern keepers were expected to be “orderly, honest and temperate” – in essence, model citizens. It was not difficult for William to secure a license to run a tavern. He was a prominent man and there was a need for a tavern along this route. William Michie was steeped in politics and was a true patriot. He had signed the Albemarle Declaration of Independence in 1779. In 1791, he became the Justice of the Peace. Later he became the town sheriff.

Michie’s Tavern soon became a central gathering place. In addition to dancing classes, the Ballroom held town meetings and worship services. Local gentlemen came to socialize and to hear the latest news from visiting travelers. In the 18th century, word of mouth was the main means of communication. The tavern played an important role in the spreading of national news as well as local gossip.

Although William Michie died in 1811, his tavern operated until 1850. After the tavern closed, the building remained a Michie home until the 20th century. The house was sold to the Via family in 1910.

In 1927, a local businesswoman and antique collector, Mrs. Mark Henderson, decided to purchase “Michie’s Old Tavern.” She saved Michie’s Tavern from disuse and decay by having it moved piece-by-piece, 17 miles, to a site just below Thomas Jefferson’s home. Here, generations of tourists could visit the historic tavern on their way to Monticello and later, James Monroe’s Ash Lawn-Highland. In the 1980’s Mrs. Henderson’s dedicated efforts were recognized for Michie Tavern was placed on the Virginia Historic Landmarks Register for its textbook example of the 1920’s Preservation Movement.

In the 1700's taverns were one of the places where you could spend the night. The innkeeper would offer you food, drink and a place to sleep. In a tavern, you would see various different activities and meet many types of people.

A Night's Stay at Michie Tavern

Read and Discuss

Traveling today is not the way it was 200 years ago. Now we journey hundreds of miles in a day, and if we do not reach our destination, we can easily stop at a hotel or motel along our route. However, in the 18th century, there were not so many places where the traveler could spend the night. If they could, most travelers stayed with friends or family. In an area where they did not know anyone, they would often stay at a Tavern.

The early road system also limited travel. Thomas Jefferson covered 34 miles in one day on his way to Washington, DC, but this was considered a long distance to travel in just one day. If the weather was poor, it could take an entire day to travel ten miles. Roads would often wash out and become impassable in rainy weather. Ferries transported people across rivers, but these were not located at every crossing, nor were they always in operation. The amount of daylight also limited travel, as rural roads had no lighting. It was easier to travel in the summer when the days were longer.

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As an 18th century traveler, you arrive at Michie Tavern on September 19th, 1787. It has been a long, dusty day of travel through the mountains of Central Virginia. The Tavern is situated on the Buck Mountain Stagecoach road and is a stop along the Stagecoach route. Many people who ride the coach spend the night here. Since you have no relatives or friends in this part of Virginia, you decide to spend the night at Michie Tavern.

As you enter the Tavern, you hear a lot of noise. William Michie, the innkeeper, asks you what sort of accommodations you wish to have. Since you have arrived late in the day, Mr. Michie cannot offer you a private room. However, there is a bed still available in the Public Bedroom. This is what you want, since a private room would have been much more expensive.

Why was travel more difficult in the 18th century?

Where would 18th century travelers spend the night?

What types of sleeping accommodations are available at the Tavern?

You did not expect to receive such a hearty meal here in this rural tavern . . .

A Night's Stay at Michie Tavern

Read and Discuss

There are rooms to be shared by groups of travelers. The government has strict laws stating exactly how much Mr. Michie can charge for his different rooms. You agree to Mr. Michie's price and a young slave takes your small pack of belongings to the Public Bedroom. Mr. Michie has more than 25 slaves who help in the tavern and on his plantation. He inherited most of the slaves from his father, who died 10 years ago.

After your long day, you are hungry! Innkeepers like Mr. Michie will often serve a special meal to gentlemen willing to pay a little extra. Often, a group of men will order a "Club dinner" in advance, and then split the cost amongst them. These "Club dinners" are popular with local residents who want to eat a meal with friends.

However, you have not arranged for anything special in advance. Since you do not want to spend extra money, you agree to have the standard fare, which everyone else is eating. You take a seat with two other gentlemen at a small wooden table in the corner of the Tap Bar room. This room has a small bar where gentlemen are served beverages. One of the Michie's children comes to serve you fried chicken, green beans and biscuits. Although this is typical fare in this region, the meal is excellent and very filling. You complement Mr. Michie on the good food. You did not expect to receive such a hearty meal here in this rural tavern, miles from the nearest town.

Michie Tavern is a popular place for local people to congregate. There are few other places in this area that have such large spaces for meetings, dinners and social gatherings. Many local people come to Michie Tavern to meet friends, have a meal and learn news from travelers.

An older gentleman at your table introduces himself. He asks you about your travels in great detail. Since you have come from Philadelphia, he wants to hear all of the news from the young nation's Capitol. The newspaper that you bought in Philadelphia is interesting

Can Mr. Michie charge as much as he wants for a bed and a meal?

Describe the meal that you eat. What other type of dinner could you get in a tavern?

Why do local people come to Michie Tavern?

Soon, half a dozen men are questioning you about everything you have seen and heard in your travels.

A Night's Stay at Michie Tavern

Read and Discuss

to everyone. Often, the only current news that the local residents receive is the news they hear from travelers like you. Soon, half a dozen men are questioning you about everything you have seen and heard in your travels. The Congress has just sent the new Constitution to the States for ratification. There is much debate over whether or not Virginia should ratify this document that would create a central government.

Mr. Michie is serving rum and fruit punch in large punch bowls. There are not enough individual glasses for everyone so many of the patrons simply put the large bowl up to their lips before passing it on to the next man. You have a small tin cup in your pack, but decide not to fetch it. Toasting is a popular activity in the 18th century and you are asked to give a toast. As you toast Mr. Michie's warm hospitality, someone calls for more punch.

Later, you look around and observe all of the different activities happening in this room. Some well-dressed men are discussing tobacco prices. Tobacco is the primary crop grown in the state of Virginia. Others are playing cards. In another corner of the room, an older man is smoking a pipe and describing the cockfight that took place here earlier today at the Tavern. A slave child is busy cleaning up from the evening's meal.

Suddenly an angry planter bursts into the room. He is looking for some runaway slaves and demands to know if they are here. Mr. Michie assures the planter that they have not entered his Tavern. After all, it is illegal for slaves and Indians to visit a Tavern. The planter is very familiar with this law, but he also knows that not all innkeepers enforce the law.

You are now tired and decide to go to bed in the Public Bedroom across the hall. You think about all of the noise and activity in the Tap Bar room and wonder if you will get any sleep tonight.

Why does everyone ask you questions about your travels?

What activities are taking place in the Tap Bar Room?

What does the law say about slaves and Indians?

You drift off to sleep but are awakened by several travelers who enter the bedroom and noisily get ready for bed.

A Night's Stay at Michie Tavern

Read and Discuss

Although your bed is not very comfortable, at least the sheets appear clean. This was not the case in the tavern where you spent last night. You drift off to sleep, but are awakened by several other travelers who enter the bedroom and noisily get ready for bed. It is a busy night at the Tavern and you must share a bed with another traveler.

You awake before dawn and quickly gather your few belongings together. You must be on the road soon, for today's journey is a long one and there are several mountains and rivers to cross. As you exit the Bedroom, you climb over the bodies of men sleeping on the floor. They must have arrived very late, for you do not remember seeing them in the Tavern last night. Mr. Michie used all available sleeping space to accommodate his guests; besides sleeping on the floor, some men are even sleeping on chairs.

One of the slaves brings your horse from the stable. As you pay for the bed and the meal, you purchase a bit of cheese to take on your journey. Mrs. Michie tells you of a place where you might get a meal.

Just as you are leaving, a man rushes out with a letter. He asks if you might take it with you to North Carolina. You agree to this, take the letter, and are on your way.

Why are men sleeping on the floor?

Why are you given a letter?

A Night's Stay at Michie Tavern

Writing Activities

1. Compare and contrast this night in a tavern to what it is like to stay in a 20th century hotel. What things are different? What, if anything, is the same?

2. Write a letter or a journal entry about your stay. Since there were no telephones, many travelers wrote to their families to tell them about their trip. Others kept journals to record their travels.

A Night's Stay at Michie Tavern

Learning from actual accounts – examining quotations.

Much of what we know about early American taverns comes from letters and journals that describe what it was like to stay in a particular tavern. Here are three quotations from letters written about taverns in the 1700's:

“The accommodations at taverns, by which they call inns, are very indifferent in Philadelphia . . . The mode of conducting them is nearly the same every where. The traveller is shown, on arrival, into a room which is common to every person in the house.”

“At an obscure inn in Race Street, dropping in about dark, we were led by a steep and narrow stair-case to a chamber in the third story, so lumbered with beds as scarcely to leave room for a table and one chair, the beds superseding the necessity of more. Here we poured down a fiery beverage (wine) . . .”

“. . . had hardly got in the House before an Impudent Planter demanded my name, but not chusing to satisfie his Impertinence he laid hold on me to take me up, & but for the Landlord who step'd in would have had the Butt End of my whip which I had lifted up to give him.”

Look up definitions for all of the words you do not know.

Which words are spelled different than today? Make a list of these words.

What can be learned about tavern life in the 18th century from these quotations? Write a description of a tavern based (only) on what you read here.

Do you think these comments were accurate for all taverns and for all travelers? What might be some disadvantages of using only quotations to study this time period?

What other sources could you use to learn more about tavern life?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS & TEACHERS

Early American History & Tavern Life

Elementary Students:

If You Lived In Colonial Times by Ann McGovern

“Travel, Transportation, and Taverns” in Colonial Life by Bobbie Kalman

“A Bed and a Meal” by Carmen E. Trisler, in Cobblestone, June 1991

Junior High Students

Thomas Jefferson, Man on a Mountain by Natalie S. Bober

The Tavern and the Ferry by Edwin Tunis

The United States Constitution

Elementary Students:

The Story of the Declaration of Independence by Norman Richards

The Bill of Rights by Warren Coleman

... If You Were There when They Signed the Constitution by Elizabeth Levy

Shh! We're Writing the Constitution by Jean Fritz

Freedom Documents by Francene Sabin

Junior High & High School Students:

“We the People” The Story of the United States Constitution since 1787 by Doris Faber and Harold Faber

“A Convention of Delegates” The Creation of the Constitution by Denis J. Hauptly

Our Independence and the Constitution by Dorothy Canfield Farr

Also Cobblestone magazine has some interesting articles

