

Lesson Plan:

# Drama at the Van Cortlandt House



**Architect:**

Frederick Van Cortlandt

**Site:**

Van Cortlandt House, 1748-49

**Curriculum Link:**

High School U.S. History

Unit Two: A:3 Colonial experience:

political rights and mercantile

relationships A:4 The Revolutionary War

**Project Aim:**

Students study the architectural and historical site of the Van Cortlandt House, the oldest building in the Bronx, home of the prominent Van Cortlandt family, and strategic location for the Revolutionary War.

**Vocabulary:**

**Georgian architecture:** The classical architectural style current between 1720 and 1840, named after the four British monarchs named George. Georgian Architecture is characterized by its sense of proportion and balance. Georgian designs usually include one or more of the orders of architecture and other elements derived from ancient Rome or Greece. In the United States, this style became unpopular after the Revolution, due to its association with the colonial regime.

**Column:** An upright post, bearing the load of the upper part of a building. It consists of a base, a shaft, and a capital. An engaged column is half a column, attached to a wall, and non-weight bearing.

**Pilasters:** A rectangular engaged column, sometimes decorative, but at other times used to buttress a wall.

**Description:**

Oloff Stevense Van Cortlandt was a Dutch merchant who built his fortune through trade. His son, Jacobus Van Cortlandt began purchasing land in the Bronx in 1694, and gradually turned the family business into a wheat plantation with extensive milling operations.

Jacobus' son, Frederick, inherited the estate and commissioned the Van Cortlandt House in 1748. He chose for his house the English Georgian style of architecture, but added details that do not fit in with architectural conventions of the day. Over the nine windows on the front of the house are grotesque masks that may have been added to ward off evil

spirits. The house was built of native fieldstone. It had two parlors on the first floor, two second-floor chambers, and two smaller chambers on the third floor. One of these was left unfinished. The house was built when Frederick turned 50. It may have been built so that his two young daughters would have a place to entertain their friends as they embarked on the age of courtship. He may have also planned for his son James to have a comfortable place to live when he inherited the family plantation. Frederick died before the house was finished.

During the Revolutionary War, the house and plantation were considered neutral ground; it was headquarters to both George Washington and his troops and the British officers at various times throughout the war.

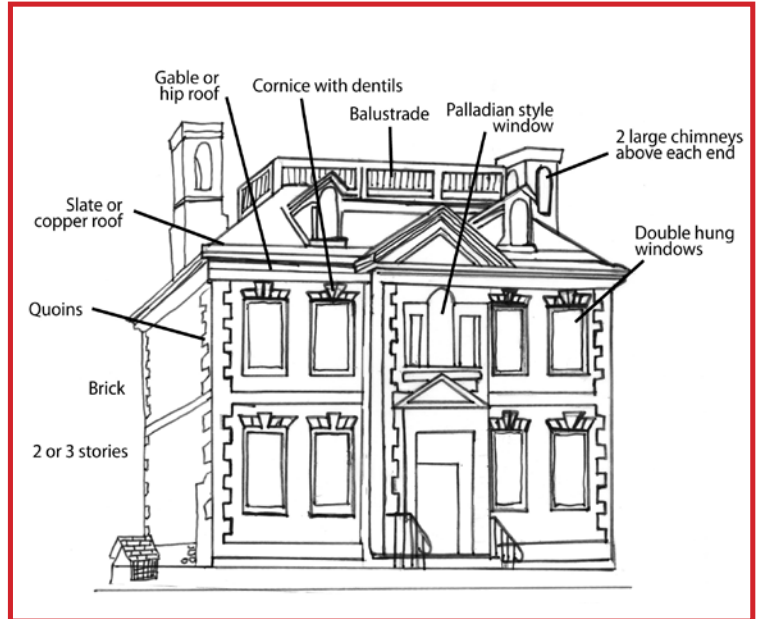
The Van Cortlandts lived in the house until 1886, when the entire estate was sold to the City of New York and became Van Cortlandt Park. The house was designated as a museum by the National Society of Colonial Dames in 1896, making it New York's oldest historical house museum. It is also the oldest building still standing in the Bronx.

### Historical Background:

Georgian architecture developed in England out of the Classical Revival which dominated Europe during the Renaissance and Enlightenment. The Georgian style's name comes from the kings of Great Britain who ruled England while Georgian architecture was popular. From 1714 until 1820 England was ruled by George I, George II and George III.

American buildings during this period closely adhered to English precedents, which were made accessible through printed books on architecture. The Georgian style was relatively homogeneous throughout the U.S.

Georgian architecture differed somewhat between England and America. The most experienced building designers did not want to leave Britain, where they could make more money and work on larger projects. For Americans, the result was simpler buildings. Although many of the same elements of Georgian architecture exist in American and British buildings, American structures usually have fewer and less elaborate elements.



Standards of Georgian architecture

Georgian architecture became unpopular in the United States at the time of the Revolutionary War as American architects wished to separate their style from British influence.

### Why use architecture? What can it teach us?

Art is part of the complex structure of beliefs and rituals, social and political systems, and the stories of every human society. In architecture, the structure, function, and purpose

of a building is fused seamlessly with the aesthetic, social, and political preferences of a particular time and place. The purpose for a building's use determines its size, its shape, and the materials chosen. The value that a society places on that purpose is reflected in the decoration, the scale, and the amount of time taken to create a building. Architects choose to borrow styles from the past as their interpretation of a particular philosophy or ideal. Buildings embody cultural values in every tile or stone. This unit enables students to place architecture within a historical context.

### Time Required:

Five class periods plus research that will be conducted as homework.

### SESSION ONE:

Students will begin this unit through their study of the Revolutionary War.

### Objective:

Students will be able to describe basic elements of the Georgian style of architecture as interpreted by American builders, and will thereby be able to describe the social, philosophical, and political ideas inherent to this style.

### Do Now:

Students respond to the following questions, written on the board prior to class: "In the 18th Century, much of what we now know as the Bronx was called "Little Yonkers". Can you imagine what it must have been like? Who lived there? What did they do? How did it differ from the Bronx that we know today?"

### Materials:

Transparencies of examples of Georgian Architecture, including the Van Cortlandt House, overhead projector, printed out Van Cortlandt family history with questions.

### Activity:

After the students complete their reading on colonial times and the Revolutionary War, put up a transparency of a British building (such as the Royal Crescent, Bath) built in the Georgian style. Explain that this is an example of a British building during the time of the Revolutionary War.

- Ask students to spend 5 minutes writing down observations of the building.
- Ask students to share their observations as you write their answers on the board. Put a transparency of the Van Cortlandt house on the projector.
- Tell students to spend 5 minutes recording their observations of the differences and similarities between this example of American Georgian Architecture and its British counterparts.
- Ask students to share their observations as you write down their answers on the board.
- Ask students what they think the reasons are for the somewhat simpler yet similar designs in American Georgian Architecture?
- Ask students why they think American architecture at the time was so heavily influenced by the architecture in England?

Give each student a copy of the Van Cortlandt family history with questions. Ask them to review the information and answer the questions. This may be completed as homework.

### Wrap Up:

Ask class: Why would this family live in this kind of house? Bring together the ideas raised by looking at the architecture and considering the Van Cortlandt family history. Tell students that they will be writing a play based on the Van Cortlandt family, so they should be prepared to imagine going back in time.



Royal Crescent, Bath, England

## SESSION TWO:

Students visit the Van Cortlandt House.

### Objective:

Students will be able to observe and identify elements of Georgian Architecture, experience what it might have been like to live as the Van Cortlandts did in the 18th Century, and think about the use of the house by both armies during the Revolutionary War.

### Materials:

Each student will bring a notebook or a clipboard with blank pages attached.

### Activity:

Students will be asked to take notes on the people who lived in and stayed at the Van Cortlandt House and draw sketches as they visit each room of the house. They will each draw a sketch of the house exterior. They will be able to use this visual information for the next part of the project.

## SESSION THREE:

Students work in groups to create one-act plays based on the information that they learned on the Van Cortlandts, their house, and the Revolutionary War.

### Objective:

Students will be able to imagine the choices, the conflicts, and the struggles that went on throughout the long history of the Van Cortlandt mansion by creating a one-act play based on choices listed on their worksheets, and short historical descriptions.

### Do Now:

Students respond to the following question, written on the board prior to class: "Can you imagine what it might have been like living in the Van Cortlandt House in the 18th

Century? Think about one of the people who you learned about on the tour, and write an imaginary journal entry.”

**Activity:**

Divide students into groups of four or five. Ask each group to choose one person as the recorder. Give each group a different paper that describes a scenario. Each group will choose one item from each category. Based on the information given and the students’ knowledge of American history, they will write a script for a one-act play. They must include an introduction, a climax, something that a character needs (could be an object, information, or a favor), and a conclusion in their play. A line requirement might be given.

**SESSION FOUR:**

Students continue to work in groups. They complete their scripts and rehearse for the second half of the class.

**Objective:**

Students will be able to imagine the choices, the conflicts, and the struggles that went on throughout the long history of the Van Cortlandt mansion by creating a one-act play based on choices listed on the board and short historical descriptions.

**Do Now:**

Students respond to the following question, written on the board prior to class: “Can you think of a modern day situation that is similar to the problems the characters face in your play? Write a brief synopsis for this contemporary conflict.”

**Activity:**

Divide students into the same groups that they were in yesterday. Tell them that they have half the period to complete their scripts, and half the period to work on their characters and rehearse

**SESSION FIVE:**

Students present their plays.

**Objective:**

Students will successfully depict the choices, the conflicts, and the struggles of the Van Cortlandt family presented by the other groups in the class. In addition, they will be able to critically assess the plays of their classmates.

**Do Now:**

Students respond to the following questions, written on the board prior to class: “What genre was your play written in? Is it a comedy? A tragedy? Drama? Do you think this is the best tone for the information you are sharing? Why or why not?”

**Activity:**

Students present their one-act plays to the class. While observing, students are asked to write down one complement and one question for each play that is not their own. At the end of each play, these thoughts are shared with the presenters.

### ASSESSMENT:

At the end of the workshop, students turn in their building observations, their answers to the Van Cortlandt family history with questions, their drawings from their visit to the Van Cortlandt House, and their scripts. They will also be graded on their level of participation in the play.

### EXTENSIONS:

1. Students can further develop their plays using their drawings from their visit to the Van Cortlandt House to build sets. They can also make costumes, and develop their characters.
2. Students can work together as a class to bring their short plays together to create a play that covers different periods throughout the Van Cortlandt family history. Ask the students to address the theme of how the structure of the building remains constant while the attitudes of the people who live in and use the building change.
3. Other classes may be invited to see the Van Cortlandt family play—or the play may be videotaped.
4. Students can write reviews of the other groups' plays.



King George III in coronation robes

### STANDARDS:

S.S. Standard 1—History of the United States and New York: Students will learn about American History through their study of the Van Cortlandt family and their estate.

S.S. Standard 2—World History: Students will develop an understanding of the ideas, social and cultural values, beliefs, and history leading to the Georgian style in both U.S. and European architecture, and the global causes and effects of the American Revolutionary War.

S.S. Standard 3—Geography: Students will study the physical and social environments and human systems of New York in the 18th Century.

S.S. Standard 4—Economics: Students will consider the economic structures and controls used by the Van Cortlandt family.

S.S. Standard 5—Civics, Citizenship, and Government: Students will learn about the changing political systems of America before the Revolutionary War; and the different assumptions on power, authority, governance, and law held by the people living during these times.

## RESOURCES FOR RESEARCH:

### Web

American Memory Project, U.S. Library of Congress  
<http://memory.loc.gov>

Historic House Trust  
<http://www.historichousetrust.org>

Lehman College Art Gallery Public Art in the Bronx  
<http://www.lehman.edu/publicart>

Metropolitan Museum of Art, Timeline of Art History  
[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/splash.htm?HomePageLink=toah\\_1](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/splash.htm?HomePageLink=toah_1)

Van Cortlandt House  
<http://www.vancortlandthouse.org>

### Books

Honour, H. and Fleming, J. *The Visual Arts: A History*, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc., 2005.

Salvadori, M., Hooker, S. and Ragus, C. *The Art of Construction: Projects and Principals for Beginning Engineers and Architects*, Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1990.

White, N. and Willensky, E. *AIA Guide to New York City: The Classic Guide to New York's Architecture (4th Edition)*, NY: Three Rivers Press, 2000.

## VAN CORTLANDT FAMILY HISTORY AND QUESTIONS:



Oloff Stevense Van Cortlandt

Oloff Stevense Van Cortlandt was a Dutch merchant who built his fortune through trade. His son, Jacobus Van Cortlandt began purchasing land in the Bronx in 1694, and gradually turned the family business into a wheat plantation with extensive milling operations.

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the first floor, two second-floor chambers, and two smaller chambers on the third floor. One of these was left unfinished. The house was built when Frederick turned 50. It may have been built so that his two young daughters would have a place to entertain their friends as they embarked on the age of courtship. He may have also planned for his son James to have a comfortable place to live when he inherited the family plantation. Frederick died before the house was finished.

During the Revolutionary War, the house and plantation were considered neutral ground; it was headquarters to both George Washington and his troops and the British officers at various times throughout the war.

The Van Cortlandts lived in the house until 1886, when the entire estate was sold to the City of New York and became Van Cortlandt Park. The house was designated as a museum by the National Society of Colonial Dames in 1896, making it New York's oldest historical house museum. It is also the oldest building still standing in the Bronx.

1. Why do you think a prominent Dutch family living in America would adapt the predominant style of architecture under King George?
2. When was the house built? What was the political situation in America at this time? Do you think if one of Frederick's sons had decided to build another house 30 years later he would have chosen the same style? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think the Van Cortlandt house was used as headquarters for both General Washington and the British Officers?
4. What do you think the Georgian style of architecture came to represent to Americans during and after the Revolutionary War? Why?

Choose one person to be the recorder. This paper describes your scenario. You are to choose one item from each category. Based on the information given and your knowledge of American history, you will write a script for a one-act play. You must include an introduction, a climax, something that a character needs (this could be an object, information, or a favor), and a conclusion to your play.

### Scenario 1:

It is 1733. Jacobus Van Cortlandt places an advertisement in "The New York Gazette" to recover a runaway slave named Andrew Saxton. In his ad, he describes Saxton as "a tall lusty fellow, is very black walks stopping, and somewhat lamish with his left leg; the thumb of his left hand is somewhat stiff, by a wound he had in his hand formerly; the shirts he had with him and on his back are marked with a cross on the left breast. He professeth himself a Roman Catholic, speaks very good English, is a carpenter and cooper by trade, and has with him a broad-ax, a two-foot rule, and a hollow howl."

Choose one from each category to determine the story:

#### Character 1:

1. Jacobus Van Cortlandt
2. Andrew Saxton

(List 5 personality characteristics and write down one thing that this person needs)

#### Character 2:

1. Eva Van Cortlandt (Jacobus' wife)
2. New York Gazette Reporter
3. Frederick Van Cortlandt (Jacobus' son)

(List 5 personality characteristics and write down one thing that this person needs)

#### Time:

1. Morning
2. Afternoon
3. Evening
4. Night

#### Place:

1. The Unfinished Chamber
2. The East Parlor
3. In the Van Cortlandt property fields
4. In NYC

#### Prop:

1. A gun
2. A letter
3. A newspaper
4. A wallet full of money

#### Emotion:

1. Anger
2. Fear
3. Excitement
4. Pride



1852 oil painting depicting the scene of a slave market

Choose one person to be the recorder. This paper describes your scenario. You are to choose one item from each category. Based on the information given and your knowledge of American history, you will write a script for a one-act play. You must include an introduction, a climax, something that a character needs (this could be an object, information, or a favor), and a conclusion to your play.

### Scenario 2:

It is 1749. Construction on Frederick Van Cortlandt's house began last year and is still underway. At the same time, Frederick becomes ill and dies later that year. When he dies, his three sons are age 22, 21, and 19, and his daughters are 13 and 12. In his will he bequeaths to his wife Frances "My two negro girls, two chaises, and the use of my estate for your lifetime," He also leaves Levelle the boatman to his son James, five more slaves to Frances, a female slave to each of his daughters, Anne and Eve, and a male slave to each of his sons, Augustus and Frederick.

Choose one from each category to determine the story:

#### Character 1:

1. Frederick Van Cortlandt
2. James Van Cortlandt (Frederick's son)
3. Levelle the boatman

(List 5 personality characteristics and write down one thing that this person needs)

#### Character 2:

1. Frances Van Cortlandt (Frederick's wife)
2. Anne Van Cortlandt (Frederick's daughter)
3. The lead person in the construction of the house

(List 5 personality characteristics and write down one thing that this person needs)

#### Time:

1. Early in the year before Frederick becomes sick
2. In the summer when Frederick is ill
3. At the time of Frederick's death
4. After his death

#### Place:

1. In the unfinished kitchen of the house
2. In a barn on the estate
3. In the Van Cortlandt property fields
4. In the West Parlor

#### Prop:

1. A will
2. A letter
3. A deed
4. A piece of jewelry

#### Emotion:

1. Sadness
2. Joy
3. Excitement
4. Pride



1844 oil painting by George Harvey

Choose one person to be the recorder. This paper describes your scenario. You are to choose one item from each category. Based on the information given and your knowledge of American history, you will write a script for a one-act play. You must include an introduction, a climax, something that a character needs (this could be an object, information, or a favor), and a conclusion to your play.

### Scenario 3:

It is 1775. The revolutionary war has begun with the battles of Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts. James is a colonel in the Westchester County Militia. He and his brother Frederick are elected to represent Westchester in the new Provincial Congress. They tell their brother Augustus, who is a clerk of the city and county of New York, to secure the city records from the British due to the "alarming state of public affairs." Despite having sympathies towards the British, he put the records into chests and secured them in a cellar in the garden.

Choose one from each category to determine the story:

#### Character 1:

1. Frederick Van Cortlandt, Jr.
2. James Van Cortlandt

(List 5 personality characteristics and write down one thing that this person needs)

#### Character 2:

1. Augustus Van Cortlandt
2. Elizabeth Cuyler (James' wife)
3. Frances Van Cortlandt (Frederick, James, and Augustus' mother)

(List 5 personality characteristics and write down one thing that this person needs)

#### Time:

1. During the Provincial Congress elections
2. During a meeting between the three brothers about the "alarming state of affairs."
3. After James and Frederick meet with Augustus

#### Place:

1. In a court room in NYC
2. In the Van Cortlandt parlor
3. In the garden cellar
4. In the Van Cortlandt kitchen

#### Prop:

1. A newspaper
2. A letter
3. City Records
4. A key

#### Emotion:

1. Fear
2. Anger
3. Excitement
4. Resentment

Choose one person to be the recorder. This paper describes your scenario. You are to choose one item from each category. Based on the information given and your knowledge of American history, you will write a script for a one-act play. You must include an introduction, a climax, something that a character needs (this could be an object, information, or a favor), and a conclusion to your play.

### Scenario 4:

It is 1776. The Revolutionary War is raging. On October 12, General Washington sets up temporary headquarters at Van Cortlandt House. They stay until October 18, heading for White Plains. Philip Van Cortlandt, James' cousin, worked as an aid to the Commander in Chief. The battle of White Plains takes place between October and November of that year.

Choose one from each category to determine the story:

#### Character 1:

1. General Washington
2. James Van Cortlandt

(List 5 personality characteristics and write down one thing that this person needs)

#### Character 2:

1. Philip Van Cortlandt
2. Frederick Van Cortlandt Jr.
3. An American officer

(List 5 personality characteristics and write down one thing that this person needs)

#### Time:

1. Before George Washington's army arrives at the Van Cortlandt House
2. During the occupation
3. As the army prepares to leave for the next battle

#### Place:

1. In a field on the Van Cortlandt plantation
2. In the dining room
3. In the Van Cortlandt parlor
4. In the unfinished room

#### Prop:

1. A map
2. A letter
3. A medal
4. A key

#### Emotion:

1. Fear
2. Anger
3. Excitement
4. Worry



Earliest portrait of Washington, painted in 1772 by Charles Willson Peale, shows Washington in uniform as colonel of the Virginia Regiment