

About the Comic

The Magic Pen is a vibrant, student-friendly comic book designed for readers ages 8–12. Blending history and imagination, this story follows two curious students who discover a quill pen inside the historic Dey Mansion and are suddenly transported back to 1780; right into the heart of the American Revolution.

As they explore the mansion-turned-headquarters of General George Washington, the children meet the Dey family, observe wartime planning and encounter Filis, an enslaved girl whose story reveals a deeper truth about liberty and whose voice deserves to be remembered.

Full of adventure, emotional insight, and historically grounded details, *The Magic Pen* invites young readers to see history not just as a series of dates, but as lived experiences.

Aimed towards Educators

The Magic Pen is a student-friendly comic book for grades 3–6 that connects New Jersey students to their local Revolutionary War history. Set at the real-life Dey Mansion in Wayne, this engaging story follows two modern kids who time-travel to 1780, where they meet George Washington, the Dey family, and an enslaved girl names Filis. Perfect for classroom use or to pair with field trips, this resource encourages critical thinking about liberty, justice, and New Jersey's role in the American Revolution.

Educator's Guide to *The Magic Pen*

Learning Objectives

By reading this comic book, students will:

- Understand the significance of the Dey Mansion as George Washington's headquarters in 1780.
- Gain awareness of daily life during the Revolutionary War for both free and enslaved people.
- Recognize the ideals of the American Revolution, while learning how those ideals were not experienced equally by all.
- Build empathy, critical thinking, and a personal connection to history through storytelling.

Themes

George Washington's Leadership

Discuss his calm, deliberate leadership, and the pressure of wartime decision-making.

Revolutionary War Planning

The Dey Mansion was a strategic headquarters. Students can locate it on a map of New Jersey.

Life in 1780

Compare colonial life with students' own lives. Emphasize the labor required to run a household.

Enslavement in New Jersey

Center this part of the conversation in dignity and truth. Students can explore how freedom was defined differently for different people.

Women and the Homefront

Women kept households functioning and often aided the war effort, though not as soldiers.

Literacy & Critical Thinking

Reading Comprehension

Use speech bubbles to model character voice and expression.

Cause & Effect

What caused Harper and Ben to time travel? What changed as a result?

Compare & Contrast

Venn diagrams, illustrated journals, or then-vs-now posters.

Inference

Infer Fillis's feelings and hopes from limited dialogue, then expand in writing.

Personal Reflection

Students can reflect on how they would have felt in Ben and Harper's shoes after meeting Fillis.

Discussion Questions for Students

What do you notice about the sign in front of the Dey Mansion?

Why do you think Ben and Harper think the Dey Mansion might be haunted?

Do you think it's respectful to treat a historic house like a haunted house? Why or why not?

What clues show you that George Washington's office was an important place during the war?

Why do you think Harper is so curious? What would you do in this situation if you found a pen that glowed?

What do you think Esther is thinking when she sees the kids?

Why does the word "treason" scare Harper?

What do you think it was like to worry about loyalty and betrayal during the American Revolution?

What can we learn from Fillis's presence in the room?

Why is it important to ask questions about whose stories get told in history?

What do you notice about George Washington's entrance?

How would it feel to be in a leadership position during this time?

What do the kids learn about the hardships of war?

If you were in Ben or Harper's shoes, how would you explain to your teacher where you were?

Educator Notes for “A Moment with Fillis”

Learning Objective:

Students will begin to understand that not everyone in Revolutionary America experienced “freedom” equally and will develop empathy for the experiences of enslaved children.

Historical Context

The Dey Mansion was a working estate in 1780. While it was home to a well-off patriot family, it also relied on the labor of **enslaved people**.

New Jersey was a slaveholding colony/state during the American Revolution. Slavery in the North existed well into the early 1800s.

The American Revolution preached liberty and equality, but many people, **especially black Americans and women**, were not included in those ideals at the time.

Themes for Discussion

Freedom vs. Reality – The disconnect between Revolutionary ideals and lived experience.

Voice and Visibility – Why it's important to remember people like Filis, who were historically silenced.

Allyship and Memory – What can young people do today to honor forgotten stories?

Sample Discussion Questions

1. **Why do you think Fillis doesn't want to travel to the future with Ben and Harper?**
2. **Why do you think Fillis ask the kids to tell everyone about her?**
3. **How do we remember people from history who weren't famous or powerful?**
4. **What can we learn from Fillis's story today?**

For advanced students:

5. **How does this moment change Ben and Harper? What do you think they might do when they return home?**

Activity Suggestions

A. “Whose Stories Are Missing?” Timeline

- Create a classroom timeline of the Revolutionary War.
- Add *known* figures (like Washington) and *unknown* ones (like Fillis) together.
- Ask students to create a drawing, diary entry, or short comic about someone who might have lived during that time but wasn't in the history books.

B. “Promise Keeper” Letter

- Students write a letter *from Ben or Harper's perspective* in the present day, explaining how they were going to remember Phillis and her story.
- Letters can be illustrated and collected into a class "Book of Voices."

C. "Then and Now" Comparison

- Research what life was like for enslaved children in 1780.
- Compare it to the life of a free child today—chores, school, freedom of movement.
- What has changed? What do we still need to work on?

Teaching Tips on Difficult Topics

- **Use gentle, clear language:** Instead of overwhelming terms, explain that some people were *not allowed to make choices* about their lives, and that this was very wrong.
- **Center empathy:** Encourage students to reflect on how they would feel in Phillis's shoes, or Ben or Harper's
- **Be ready for strong reactions:** Some students may feel anger, confusion, or sadness. These are valid. Create space to talk through them.
- **Connect past to present:** Help students understand that history affects today's world, and they have a role in shaping a fairer future.

Activities for Lesson Planning

1. Pre-Reading Activity: Predicting the Past

Objective: Build historical curiosity and prepare for reading.

Instructions: Before reading the comic, show students the cover page and back page. Ask:

What do you think this comic will be about?

Who are the people on the cover? Do some look different than others?

Why would George Washington stay at someone's house during the American Revolution?

Extension: Create a K-W-L (Know, Want to Know, Learned) chart about the American Revolution and New Jersey history.

2. Time-Travel Artifact Exploration

Objective: Identify how objects tell stories.

Instructions: After reading the comic, have students list objects that appear in both the past and the present (ie., feather pen, desk, uniforms, candle, etc.).

Activity: Match each item to its use in 1780 and today. Write or draw how each object might “feel” if it could talk about what it has seen (personify the item).

Cross-curricular: History and creative writing

3. Historic vs. Personal Voices

Objective: Distinguish between famous figures and forgotten voices.

Instructions: Compare George Washington's dialogue with Fillis's scenes.

Ask:

Whose voices do we hear the most?

Who is speaking less – and why might that be?

Activity: Students write a diary entry from the point of view of Fillis, Ben, or Esther. Encourage empathy, but keep it grounded in historical reality.

4. Liberty for whom? A Declaration revisited.

Objective: Evaluate the limits of freedom in 1780.

Instructions: Use page 12 where Harper references the Declaration of Independence.

Activity: As a class, rewrite a version of the Declaration of Independence that includes women, enslaved people, and children. Title it your class's Declaration of Independence.

Discussion Prompt: What did freedom mean for different people in the Revolutionary era? Has that changed?

5. Map the Story: Revolutionary Geography

Objective: Locate key places in the comic on a New Jersey or Colonial America map.

Instructions: Find Wayne, NJ (Preakness) on a modern and colonial map. Located other locations mentioned: West Point, Camden, South Carolina.

Activity: Plot Washington's likely travel route between his headquarters in the area: New Bridge (River Edge, Bergen County), Jockey Hollow (Morristown, Morris County), Rockingham (Franklin Township, Somerset County)

Assessment Options

Short Response: What would you tell someone about the Dey Mansion after reading this comic?

Oral Presentation: Small group reenactment of a comic scene with costumes or props.

Visual Project: Design a modern museum panel for one page of the comic.

Research Extension: Students explore real letters from the 1780s and compare them to the comic.

New Jersey Social Studies Standards for The Magic Pen and Educator's Guide

Grades 4–5 / Elementary School – Middle School

- 6.1.U.S. History: America in the World - the core standard under which U.S. colonial history, the Revolution, and early independent America are taught.
- 6.1.5.HistoryCC.1: Analyze key historical events from the past to explain how they led to the creation of the state of New Jersey and the United States.
- 6.1.5.HistoryCC.8: Make evidence-based inferences to describe how the influence of early groups (Native Americans, colonists, enslaved people) shaped New Jersey's regions and heritage.
- 6.1.5.HistoryCC.15: Analyze key historical documents (e.g. Declaration of Independence) to determine their role in past and present-day government and citizenship.
- 6.1.4.D.4/D.5/D.6: Explain how key events led to the creation of the United States and New Jersey; relate founding documents (Declaration, Constitution) to modern citizenship; describe civic leadership contributions of founding figures.

- 6.1.4.D.8 (from 4th-grade band / earlier standards): Determine the significance of New Jersey's role in the American Revolution.
- 6.1.4.D.9: Explain the impact of trans-Atlantic slavery on New Jersey, the nation, and individuals. This is relevant if the comic addresses enslaved people's lives (like Phillis).