

Reading Drill #2

Candles in Colonial America

The lack of artificial sources of light meant that most colonial Americans had to begin and end their day's activities with the sun. Houses, shops, and workrooms were usually oriented so their long sides faced east and west. This allowed the walls of the building with the largest surface areas to be devoted to windows that captured the strongest light as the sun traversed the sky. In winter, the duration in which daylight was strong decreased, and what light there was tended to be pale. Craftspersons usually saw their productivity fall accordingly.

Those who needed light for reading or working by night generally relied on candles which at that time were of generally inferior quality. The wick of a modern candle is designed to burn down as the wax does, so a candle can be left burning for long periods. The wicks of colonial candles, however, burned more slowly than the wax they were drawing up. This meant that candles had to be frequently "snuffed," that is, the **wick** cut off so that it didn't droop over as the wax burned out from under it. A special tool for snipping the wick was used, and care had to be taken to cut enough of the wick away without putting out the flame.

The wax itself was also a problem. Most new colonists would likely have preferred candles of beeswax, which burned smoothly, slowly and cleanly and produced a pleasing fragrance. Unfortunately, beeswax for candles was too dear for most households to afford for daily use in lighting. The most common candle type, in North America as in Europe, was made of tallow, the fat that melted from cow's or sheep's meat during roasting. A pan would be put in underneath the cooking meat to catch the tallow as it ran out. When the pan was set aside, the collected **tallow** congealed as it cooled. Since juices and small pieces of meat were invariably mixed in, it had to be purified before use. When the women of a household had reserved enough tallow from a series of meals, they melted it again in large **kettles**. To create candles, they repeatedly dipped wicks of cotton or linen into the tallow, allowing each new layer to cool and harden before the next dipping. This laborious process produced tapers, a type of tall, narrow candle with a thick base.

Though tallow candles were the least costly night lighting available to the average family, they were difficult to use. On summer days, high temperatures could soften stored candles until the fat and wick separated, making them unusable. (The tallow could, however, be saved, melted again, and made into more candles when the weather cooperated.) They were also inconvenient. A burning tallow candle emitted a strong, unpleasant odor, and it produced almost as much smoke as light. Furthermore, tallow burned unevenly: candles often hissed, popped, and spluttered.

■ An alternative material for candles, which shared many of the desirable properties of beeswax, was discovered in the bayberry, a flowering plant native to the Eastern Seaboard. The plant had tough, nut-like fruits that could be harvested like other berries in season. Colonial women found that by boiling the fruits, they could extract their waxy **coating**. The yield in finished candles was small, like that of beeswax (even if bayberry wax was as easy to process as tallow). ■ Fifteen pounds of bayberries were required to produce just one pound of wax, so bayberry wax was more expensive than tallow. But there were compensations for people used to depending on fickle and uncooperative tallow candles. Candles made from

bayberry wax burned consistently and brightly, with little smoke. Their fragrance, like that of the berries themselves, was pleasant. ■ Records from the period indicate that bayberry candles eventually nearly equaled tallow candles in popularity. ■ Even so, it was not until the next century that further innovations made the true mass production of inexpensive, high-quality wax candles possible.

1. The word oriented in the passage is closest in meaning to
 - (A) worked in
 - (B) laid out
 - (C) brightened
 - (D) heated
2. The word duration in the passage is closest in meaning to
 - (A) period
 - (B) region
 - (C) angle
 - (D) necessity
3. The word dear in the passage is closest in meaning to
 - (A) attractive
 - (B) rare
 - (C) expensive
 - (D) thick
4. The word they in the passage refers to
 - (A) tall candles
 - (B) large kettles
 - (C) a series of meals
 - (D) the women of a household
5. Which of the following is an advantage of tallow candles?
 - (A) Low cost
 - (B) Even burning
 - (C) Pleasant fragrance
 - (D) Bright light

6. The word **them** in the passage refers to
- (A) high temperatures
 - (B) summer days
 - (C) most families
 - (D) stored candles
7. Underline the term in **bold** text that is defined in the passage.
8. Why were bayberry candles expensive for the colonists?
- (A) The berries were rare and hard to find.
 - (B) Extracting the wax required time and effort.
 - (C) Each berry produced little wax.
 - (D) The fragrance made the candles a luxury.
9. Why does the author mention records from the colonial period in paragraph 5?
- (A) Records list the advantages of bayberry over tallow.
 - (B) Records show when colonists first made tallow candles.
 - (C) Records show bayberry candles were commonly used.
 - (D) There are no records of the first candles mass-produced in the colonies.
10. Underline the square where the following sentence would best fit if added to the passage.
- These advantages seem to have made bayberry candles worth the extra cost for colonists.
11. Paragraph 5 mainly discusses
- (A) the process of extracting wax from bayberries
 - (B) the first mass production of bayberry candles
 - (C) why the bayberry was suited to candle making
 - (D) the source of the bayberry's fragrance
12. The word **yield** in the passage refers to
- (A) how many candles could be produced
 - (B) how much light bayberry candles emitted
 - (C) how convenient bayberry candles were to use
 - (D) how long it took to remove the waxy coating from bayberries

13. Directions: An introductory sentence for a brief summary of the passage is provided below. Complete the summary by selecting the **THREE** answer choices that express the most important ideas in the passage. Some sentences do not belong in the summary because they express ideas that are not presented in the passage or are minor details in the passage. This question is worth 2 points.

The candles colonists relied on to provide artificial light presented many difficulties.

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Answer Choices	
The most common candles were made of tallow, an animal fat that gave poor light.	Candle makers were busy and often saw their productivity fall in winter.
Candles made of bayberry wax had many advantages that made them popular despite their expense.	Beeswax was a material that produced candles with a pleasant fragrance.
It took the colonists many years before they discovered how to extract wax from bayberries.	Candle wicks burned slowly and needed constant attention.