Letters from Trenton, 1776:
Teaching with Primary Sources

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December 27, 1776

Dear Mother,

Yesterday we were in the town of Trenton. We were attacking the Hessians. We had to cross the Delaware River. It was cold and very late..... Colonel Glover had problems getting all of us in the boats.

When we finally were in battle, I killed several Hessians. General Washington was very brave during this battle ... I did not get a chance to ask him if I would be returning home after this battle, but soon found out that I wouldn’t.

Remember, no matter what happens, I will always love you. Write me soon and pray for me always.

Love,
Your son, Nathan

Do these sound like the words from a faded letter written by a Continental soldier during the American Revolution? Can you picture a tired, young Patriot writing to his mother in the aftermath of the Continental Army’s surprise attack on the mighty Hessians? Possibly, but while the letter is based on the historical event of the Battle of Trenton during the American Revolution, the words are from one of my fifth-graders who became fascinated in the people and events involved in this pivotal victory for the young nation.

In the fifth grade, our social studies curriculum is based on American history. Often, at the beginning of the year, I hear questions such as, “Why do we need to know about what happened to people who are dead?” It became my goal to find a way to make the people who lived in the past come to life. I wanted to ignite a spark in my students to motivate them to discover the exciting stories embedded in our country’s history from a variety of perspectives.
“The social studies program should be designed to increase the students’ ability to conceptualize unfamiliar categories of information, establish cause/effect relationships, determine the validity of information and arguments, and develop a new story, model, narrative, picture, or chart that adds to the student’s understanding of an event, idea, or persons while meeting criteria of valid social studies research.” Critically reading eyewitness accounts of historical events from varying perspectives develops my students’ ability to think critically; to read a historical text and construct their own meaning of historical events. I have two main goals for such a lesson: students will (i) comprehend historical events accurately and in a way meaningful to them, and (ii) develop their critical thinking skills.

This article describes one of many inquiry investigations I designed for my fifth grade students in order to provide real and meaningful reading experiences through primary documents. Groups of students examined historical eyewitness accounts (in newspaper articles, diaries, and letters) of the Battle of Trenton during the American Revolution (Sidebar A). Through their investigations and reconstructions of the past, my students not only became excited about history, but also discovered that multiple perspectives on events exist, and that personal accounts can provide us with insights into the struggles and challenges faced by our predecessors.

Providing Background Knowledge
I have seen how elementary students can walk away from a class with misconceptions about historical events if those events are simply presented by various media, such as slide shows and videos, without any explanation from the teacher. In order for my students to fully benefit from the reading of historical letters, diaries, and newspaper articles, they must first have some foundational knowledge of the time in which the documents were written. Therefore, I construct historical resource packets and challenge students to delve into them prior to the lesson. These packets provide background information that helps students construct the meaning of an historical event. In the example discussed here, a lesson about the Battle of Trenton, I included in the packet a line drawn map of the battleground and troop movements, a textbook description of the battles, a “cast of characters” listing the names of some of the major historical figures involved, and a paragraph from the Library of Congress about using primary sources (see Sidebar B, page 11).

Reading from a Replica
Deciphering copies of original historical documents can be very challenging for fifth graders. I gradually introduce my students to the challenge of reading from primary documents from the first week of school.

An image of a historical document (a photograph of the actual thing) may be available from a museum, government archive, or historical society website, often in the form of a PDF file. Some of these image files are of good enough quality to print out and distribute in the classroom. In cooperative groups of four or five children each, students silently read a text, highlighting specific words, phrases, or sentences that are unfamiliar to them. Most often, they highlight unfamiliar words and misspelled words.

I avoid using texts that are dense with antiquated language (long, flowery sentences, for example) in favor of more personal works (letters, diaries, etc.) that tend to be plainer in their message. If I pass out a copy of a letter in its original handwriting, then reading the penmanship becomes part of the learning challenge. I will ask students to write words in block letters above cursive writing that confuses them (which happens, for example, with the old-fashioned “f” that looks like an “s”). A website I have found useful for this process is “How to Read 18th Century British-American Writing” at the DoHistory website (cited below, in Resources). It provides an overview of some of the characteristics of 18th-century colonial handwriting and steps for deciphering handwritten documents.
An Account of Battle and Troop Movements

In the Connecticut Journal of January 22, 1777, this description was published less than three weeks after the engagement. “Had the forces of Lord Cornwallis been successful in their attempts to storm the bridge, Washington might have found his army split asunder and the struggle for national independence brought to a sudden, unfavorable end.”

Immediately after the taking of the Hessians at Trenton, on the 26th ult., our army retreated over the Delaware, and remained there for several days, and then returned and took possession of Trenton, where they remained quiet until Thursday, the 2nd inst., at which time, the enemy having collected a large force at Princeton, marched down in a body of 4,000 or 5,000, to attack our people at Trenton. Through Trenton there runs a small river, over which there is a small bridge. Gen. Washington, aware of the enemy’s approach, drew his army (about equal to the enemy) over that bridge, in order to have the advantage of the said river, and of the higher ground on the farther side. Not long before sunset, the enemy marched into Trenton; and after reconnoitering our situation, drew up in solid column in order to force the aforesaid bridge, which they attempted to do with great vigor at three several times, and were as often broken by our artillery and obliged to retreat and give over the attempt, after suffering great loss, supposed at least one hundred and fifty killed.

Another account, below, discusses the memorable fight at the Assumpink bridge. It was written by an eye-witness and printed in the Princeton Whig of November 4, 1842. This passage describes the movement of the American soldiers before that battle in the cold of winter.

When the army under Washington, in the year ’76, retreated over the Delaware, I was with them. At that time there remained in Jersey only a small company of riflemen, hiding themselves between New Brunswick and Princeton. Doubtless, when Washington reached the Pennsylvania side of the river, he expected to be so reinforced as to enable him effectually to prevent the British from reaching Philadelphia. But in this he was disappointed. Finding that he must achieve victory with what men he had, and so restore confidence to his countrymen, it was then that the daring plan was laid to recross the river, break the enemy’s line of communication, threaten their depot at New Brunswick, and thus prevent their advancing to Philadelphia; which was only delayed until the river should be bridged by the ice. But Washington anticipated them. I was not with the troops who crossed to the capture of the Hessians. It was in the midst of a December storm, that I helped to reestablish the troops and prisoners on the Pennsylvania shore. The weather cleared cold, and in a few days we crossed on the ice to Trenton. Shortly afterward a thaw commenced which rendered the river impassable, and consequently the situation of the army extremely critical.

Source: Frederick L. Ferris, A History of Trenton 1769 to 1929 (Trenton Historical Society, 1929), chapter 3. Viewed at freepages.history.rootsweb.com/trenton/historyoftrenton/battles.htm
This is one of only a handful of letters that Washington wrote in which he described in any detail the battle of Trenton (aside from the routine reports to John Hancock as President of the Continental Congress). General McDougall’s son, Lt. Ranald S. McDougall, mentioned toward the end of the letter, had been captured in Canada, but he was returned in a prisoner exchange a few weeks later.

Gen McDougall
Head Quarters, Newtown 28th December 1776.

I have yours of the 27th and am sorry that Affairs bore so bad an Aspect in your Quarter at that time. But I hope that the late Success at Trenton on the 26th and the Consequence of it, will change the face of Matters not only there but every where else. I crossed over to Jersey the Evening of the 25th about 9 miles above Trenton with upwards of 2000 Men and attacked three Regiments of Hessians consisting of fifteen hundred Men about 8 o’Clock next Morning. Our Men pushed on with such Rapidity that they soon carried four pieces of Cannon out of Six, Surrounded the Enemy and obliged 30 Officers and 886 privates to lay down their Arms without firing a Shot. Our Loss was only two Officers and two or three privates wounded. The Enemy had between 20 and 30 killed.

We should have made the whole of them prisoners, could Genl. Ewing have passed the Delaware at Trenton and got in their Rear, but the ice prevented him. I am informed that Count Donnop with the remainder of the Army below Trenton, decamped immediately upon this News, and is on his march towards South Amboy. Generals Mifflin, Ewing and Cadwallader have already passed over to Jersey with a Capital Force and I shall follow with the Continental Regiments as soon as they have recovered from the late Fatigue which was indeed very great.

I hope you, Sir, Genl. Maxwell to whom I have wrote, Colo. Vose, Colo. Ford and every Gentleman who is well affected will exert themselves in encouraging the Militia and assuring them that nothing is wanting, but for them to lend a hand, and driving the Enemy from the whole province of Jersey

Pray watch the motions of the Enemy, and if they incline to retreat or advance, harass their Rear and Flanks. But at all Events endeavour to collect a Body of men to be ready to join me, or act otherwise as occasion may be.

Your son was mentioned among the first of our prisoners that I demanded in Exchange, but Genl. Howe (or Mr. Loring in his Absence) Sent out others than those I demanded. I have remonstrated to him upon this head and have assured him that I will send in no more prisoners till he sends out the paroles of the Officers taken in Canada.

I am dear Sir
Your most obt Servt
G. Washington

*Translations of many of Washington’s letters can be read at Gilder Lehrman collection, made available by PBS at www.pbs.org/georgewashington/collection/. The letter above is in a private collection.
Handout 3

An Officer’s Account

This is a transcription of an eyewitness account of the Battle of Trenton, written by an officer on General George Washington’s staff, Dec. 26, 1776

It was broad daylight when we came to a house where a man was chopping wood. He was very much surprised when he saw us. “Can you tell me where the Hessian picket is?” Washington asked. The man hesitated, but I said, “You need not be frightened, it is General Washington who asks the question.” His face brightened and he pointed toward the house of Mr. Howell.

It was just 8 o’clock. Looking down the road I saw a Hessian running out from the house. He yelled in Dutch [German] and swung his arms. Three or four others came out with their guns. Two of them fired at us, but the bullets whistled over our heads. Some of General [Adam] Stephen’s men rushed forward and captured two. The other took to their heels, running toward Mr. [Alexander] Calhoun’s house, where the picket guard was stationed, about twenty men under Captain Altenbrockum. They came running out of the house. The Captain flourished his sword and tried to form his men. Some of them fired at us, others ran toward the village. The next moment we heard drums beat and a bugle sound, and then from the west came the boom of a cannon. General Washington’s face lighted up instantly, for he knew that it was one of Sullivan’s guns. We could see a great commotion down toward the meeting-house, men running here and there, officers swinging their swords, artillerymen harnessing their horses. Captain [Thomas] Forrest unlimbered his guns. Washington gave the order to advance, and rushed on the junction of King and Queen streets. …

We saw Rall come riding up the street from his headquarters, which were at Stacy Potts’ house. We could hear him shouting in Dutch, “My brave soldiers, advance.” His men were frightened and confused, for our men were firing upon them from fences and houses and they were falling fast. Instead of advancing they ran into an apple orchard. The officers tried to rally them, but our men kept advancing and picking off the officers. It was not long before Rall tumbled from his horse and his soldiers threw down their guns and gave themselves up as prisoners.

A Woman’s Witness of War

Margaret Hill Morris (1737-1816) was a Quaker widow and local medical practitioner living in Burlington when the Revolutionary War began. Her four children were between 10 and 17 years old at the time and her sisters and father were living in Philadelphia. Her diary, written between December 6, 1776 and June 14, 1777 and excerpted here, is an important record of the early phase of the Revolution. It has been valued by historians for its information about the war and Washington’s surprise Christmas Eve attack on the Hessian camp at Trenton. It is equally important for its insights into the experience of women during the war, seen through the private feelings and values of one devout Quaker woman.

Morris abhorred warfare and resolved to stay in her Burlington home whatever might come. She witnessed the pillaging of local homes by both Hessian soldiers and American soldiers. She saw the vicious work of Tory hunters in her neighborhood and the destruction visited on local residents by Gondola Men, who were patrolling the riverside. Resolved to remain serene, she aided those in need, regardless of the side they took during the conflict.

13th [December 1776] ...the spirit of the Divil still continued to rove thro the Town in the shape of Tory Hunters...some of the Gentlemen who entertaind the foreigners were pointed out to the Gondola Men — 2 Worthy inhabitants were seizd upon & dragd on board... Parties of Armd Men rudely enterd the Houses in Town, & diligent search made for Tories, the 2 last taken releasd & sent on Shore — some of the Gondola Gentry broke into & pillagd R Smiths House on the bank....

24th.... Several Hessians in Town to day — They went to Dan Smiths and enquired for several articles in the Shop, which they offerd to pay for — 2 were observed to be in liquor in the Street, they went to the Tavern, & calling for Rum orderd the Man to Charge it to the King— we hear that 2 houses in the Skirts of the Town were broke open & pillaged by the Hessions...

3rd [January 1777] ...About bed time I went in the next house to see if the fires were safe, & my heart was melted with Compassion to see such anumber of my fellow Creatures lying like Swine on the floor fast aSleep, & many of them without even aBlanket to cover them it seems very strange to me that such aNumber shoud be allowed to come from the Camp at the very time of the engagement, & I shrewdly Suspect they have run away for they can give no account why they came, no where they are to March next. —

4th...The prisoners taken by our Troops are sent to Lancaster Jail — a Number of Sick & wounded brought into Town, calls upon us to extend a hand of Charity towards them — Several of my Soldiers left the next house, & returned to the place from whence they came, upon my questioning them pritty close, I brought several to confess they had ran away, being scared at the heavy fireing on the 3rd — There were several pritty innocent looking lads among them, & I simpathized with thier Mothers when I saw them preparing to return to the Army.

Reading from a Transcript

More often, an original work has been set in modern type (as are the handouts 1 through 4 in this article). This takes care of trying to decipher handwriting, but the challenge remains for students to understand unfamiliar words, unclear phrases, and—ultimately—the author’s intended meaning of a sentence or passage. To begin, students work together in their groups to look up unknown words in a student dictionary and discuss the possible meaning of difficult passages. After groups have worked with the document for ten to twenty minutes, I often provide them with a paraphrased version—the document in modern language and spelling—that I have created. Most of the changes I make are limited to spelling (which I update) and format (which I clarify). I aim to accurately convert the historical document into an easier-to-read form, not to interpret it. For example, in the journal entry of handout 4, the original phrase

some of the Gondola Gentry broke into & pillagd R Smiths House on the bank....

could become

Some of the American rebels, going up and down the river in boats, broke into and pillaged R. Smith’s house, which was near the edge of the river.

Students should look up the word “pillaged” if they cannot recite a definition for that word. This passage could lead to an interesting discussion. Why would the rebels pillage a house? Maybe the owner was a Tory. Do you think it was fair for the rebels to pillage their neighbors who sympathized with the British side of the conflict? Why or why not?

My students are eager to discover the differences between a primary text and my rendition of it, and over a period of weeks they began to recognize patterns in the changes that I make when I paraphrase a work. By the time we get to the unit on the American Revolution, they are able to devise their own interpretations of (for example) a personal letter from the 18th century with little or no assistance from me.

Sidebar B

Sample Primary Sources: Journals, Letters, Diaries

Find firsthand accounts of historical events written by children or young people (example: The Diary of Anne Frank). Analyze how firsthand accounts give context to historical events. Have students begin keeping their own journals with an emphasis on including current events topics in their entries.

Select a time period or era. Research and read personal letters that comment on events of the time. Analyze the point of view of the letter writer. Compose a return letter that tells the author how those historical events have affected modern society.

Read a personal diary from a historical period. Analyze the individual’s character, motivations, and opinions. Explain how the individual changed over the course of the diary. How might that person react if he or she were dropped into the present time?


The Right Questions

The Library of Congress website (listed below) provides many excellent resources for teachers and students with regard to making meaning from primary source documents. I use the “How Does It Read Guide,” which builds upon the journalistic queries: who, what, where, when why, and how. Since I am asking the students to read documents written from multiple perspectives, I supply them with these additional questions:

1. Who wrote the document?
2. Why did they write it? (Was it to inform, or persuade, or express an opinion?)
3. Did the writer have first-hand knowledge of the event?
4. Did the writer have reasons for bias, being strongly opinionated toward one perspective?
5. Was the document written for a personal or public audience?
6. Was the information written during the event, immediately after

Hessian soldiers captured during the battle of Trenton on their way to confinement in Philadelphia. D. Berger etched this image in 1784.

Library of Congress

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the event, or after some lapse of time?

7. If the latter, how much time had passed between the event and the writing?

Within cooperative groups, students use these questions to guide their reading and interpretations of past events. Together they construct historical meaning based on the evidence they are examining.

Qualities of Empathy

Developing empathy for people in the past should not be limited to just being able to identify with people from the past. Historical empathy has six fundamental qualities: a) an understanding and explanation of why people in the past acted as they did, b) an appreciation of historical context and chronology in the evaluation of past events, c) a thorough analysis and evaluation of historical evidence, d) an appreciation of the consequences of actions perpetrated in the past, e) an intuitive sense of a bygone era and an implicit recognition that the past is different from the present, and f) demonstration of respect, sensitivity, and appreciation of the complexity of human action and achievement.3 In one study, students who considered intimately the thoughts and beliefs of people in the past and developed an appreciation of their circumstances, predicaments, and actions were able to think critically about past occurrences.

To assess my students’ learning, I ask them to write letters from the perspective of someone who was an eyewitness to the Battle of Trenton. While I suggested writing from the perspective of General Washington or Colonel Rall, leader of the Hessian army, many students chose to write from the perspective of a local townsperson of Trenton, a Continental soldier, or a Hessian mercenary. Anecdotal comments and expressions of feelings demonstrated their empathy and personal connection to the past.

Enthusiasm for the Past

Through investigations with elementary and middle school students, educators Linda Levstik and Keith Barton found that children’s historical thinking is greatly enhanced by reading historical narratives that emphasize the human response to historical events.4 Their students become more enthusiastic about learning history—recognizing and valuing varying perspectives on historical events and appreciating individual differences—from reading multiple perspectives in authentic historical narratives. The National Council for History Education advocates the use of primary documents such as letters, diaries, and journals in order to allow students to perceive past events and issues as they were experienced by people of the time and recapture the essence of their real lives. In doing so, learning about the past becomes real and meaningful as students develop empathy for people faced with issues and obstacles that might otherwise be unfamiliar to them.5

Making Connections

I am constantly searching for historical documents that I can utilize in lessons. While the above lesson may not be suitable for your particular curriculum this year, the model is one that can easily be modified. First, provide a strong background knowledge base with preliminary materials and discussion. The initial resource packets allow the teacher to assemble the material used to construct that knowledge. Next, the students should read and discuss letters, diaries, and journals written by people who were eyewitnesses to events relating to the subject of study. Last, ask students to construct and demonstrate their own historical meanings through writing and/or role-play. You might find history coming alive before your eyes.

Notes


Resources on the Internet

Learn about How to Read 18th Century British-American Writing on the website at www.dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/writing.html

Teacher resources for using primary sources in the classroom can be found at the Learning Page on the Library of Congress’s website at loc.gov/learn/

“The Christmas Campaign of 1776: Many Voices” is a unit of study based on primary documents concerning the Battle of Trenton, www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/2002/2/02.02.04.x.html

Historical map of the attack on Trenton, www.lib.utexas.edu/map/historical/trenton_attack_1776.jpg


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