

Helping Students Experience Layered Research with a Civil War Diary and Data Set

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Samuel J. Gibson (1833–1878) was a Civil War soldier who served the Union with Company B, 103rd Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment. In 1864, he began recording his experiences in a pocket diary that he inscribed with a handwritten, poetic dedication,

Little Book; may you gather,
Notes of chance events,
and Weather;
And when the year has
rolled its round,
May no blank leaves in thee
be found.

S.J. Gibson
Co. B 103rd P.V.
Plymouth, N.C.

His diary's first page also included an additional note, in different ink, that read,

To his Wife
Mrs Rachel A. Gibson
Sherrett P.O.
Armstrong County
Penn

Within the diary's pages, following a printed almanac, calendar and banking table, Gibson recorded in cursive war news and rumors, the state of his physical and emotional health, and the importance

of his diary in maintaining a sense of time. From the start, Gibson also included mention of the weather. His very first entry on January 1, 1864, starts, "This morning succeeds a very stormy night." His diary also documented the capture of the federal garrison at Plymouth, North Carolina, in April 1864, and Gibson's experiences as a prisoner of war at Andersonville, Georgia, and Florence, South Carolina. The diary ends with Gibson's return to the Union at the end of 1864, with his final entries made at the parole camp near Annapolis, Maryland.

The diary has been digitized and made available online from the Library of Congress at www.loc.gov/item/mss52410001. In addition, each page of the diary has been transcribed and reviewed by volunteers participating in the Library of Congress's *By the People* project, making the

information in it even more accessible. The campaign to transcribe Gibson's papers was dubbed "This Hell-upon-earth of a prison," using Gibson's own words from his June 9th entry. Gibson used the phrase more than once to describe the terrible conditions at Andersonville.

May, WEDNESDAY, 18.
1864. This morning
pleasant. and the birds
sing as gayly as if all was
well; how much I envy
their happiness! if I were
Metamorphosed into a bird
I would not be long in this
"Bull Pen" this Hell upon
Earth. there is very little to
encourage, & the little we
do hear cannot be relied
upon. the day is intensely
hot & no protection from
the sun. The orders to the
Guards are very strict.

Viewing the images of the diary's pages and the accompanying transcriptions (text versions) requires navigating through the diary one page at a time. However, one of

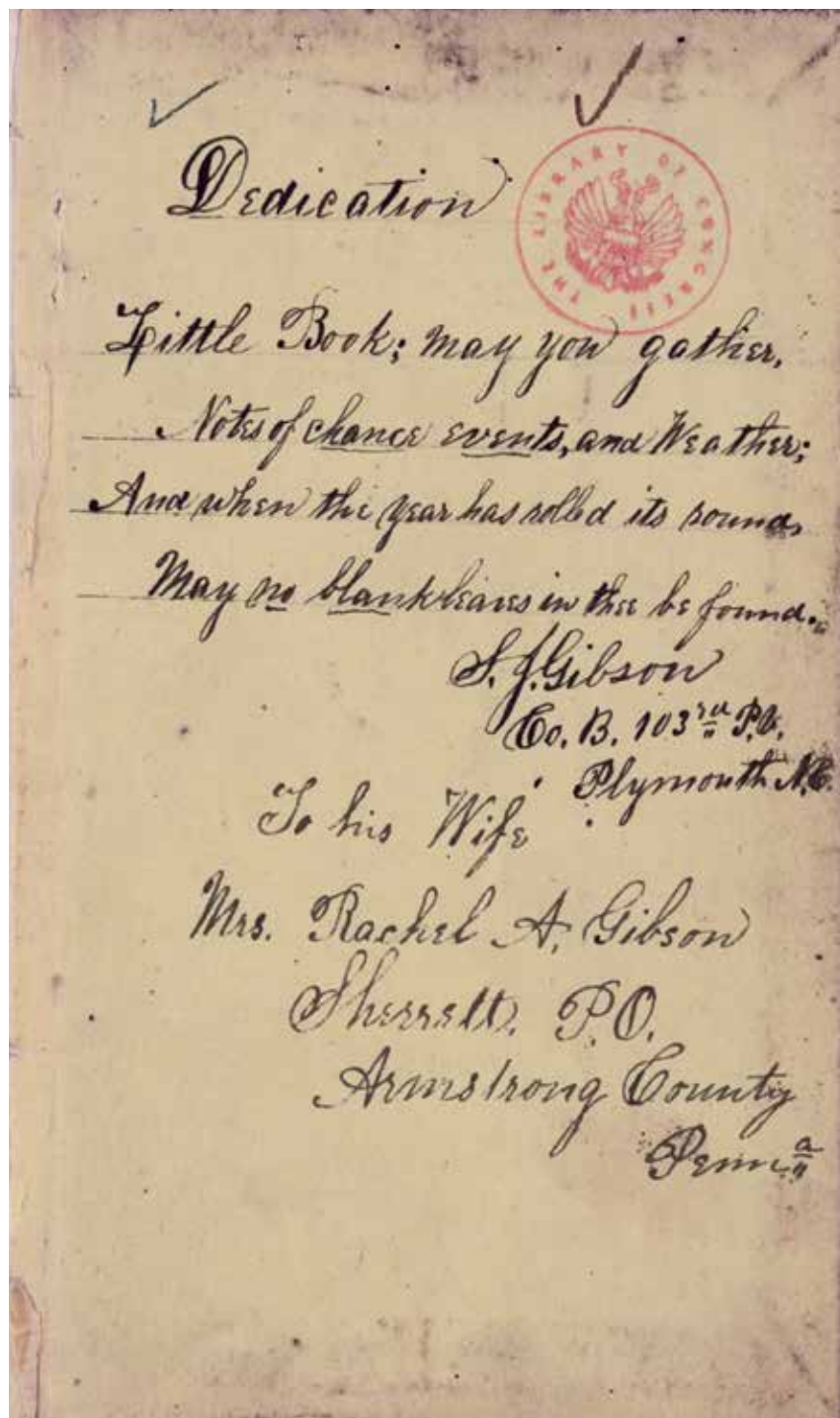
the bonus products of the *By the People* project is a dataset, available as a downloadable zip file, containing a comma-separated-values (.csv) file. It contains metadata about the pages, as well

as the full transcription of each page. (www.loc.gov/item/2019667238).

Like any .csv file, it is readable (once downloaded and unzipped) using common spreadsheet software to display

the information in neatly organized rows and columns. The benefit of this spreadsheet version is that the transcribed text of Gibson's diary is contained in its entirety in just one file, making the diary searchable using standard spreadsheet search functions. In this way, students may be able to tease out patterns in the text that might be less visible in the single page display. It is also possible to read the entire diary (and letter to Gibson's wife) by scrolling down the column containing the transcriptions. It will likely be necessary to increase the height of the rows in the spreadsheet view in order to see more than just the first line of each page. Another difficulty is that the transcriptions are not all listed in chronological order. Recognizing and unraveling this quirk, along with understanding the spreadsheet in general, can be utilized to help students develop their digital literacy skills.

As part of a lesson that includes digital literacy skills, and features data as a primary source, provide students with a copy of the spreadsheet and invite them to notice and reflect on the information contained in the file, from the url information, to the project descriptors, to the transcription itself. Ask students such questions as: What information appears to be stored in each column? Are there any patterns you notice? Some columns appear to contain only one value repeated again and again; what does this tell you about the information? How is

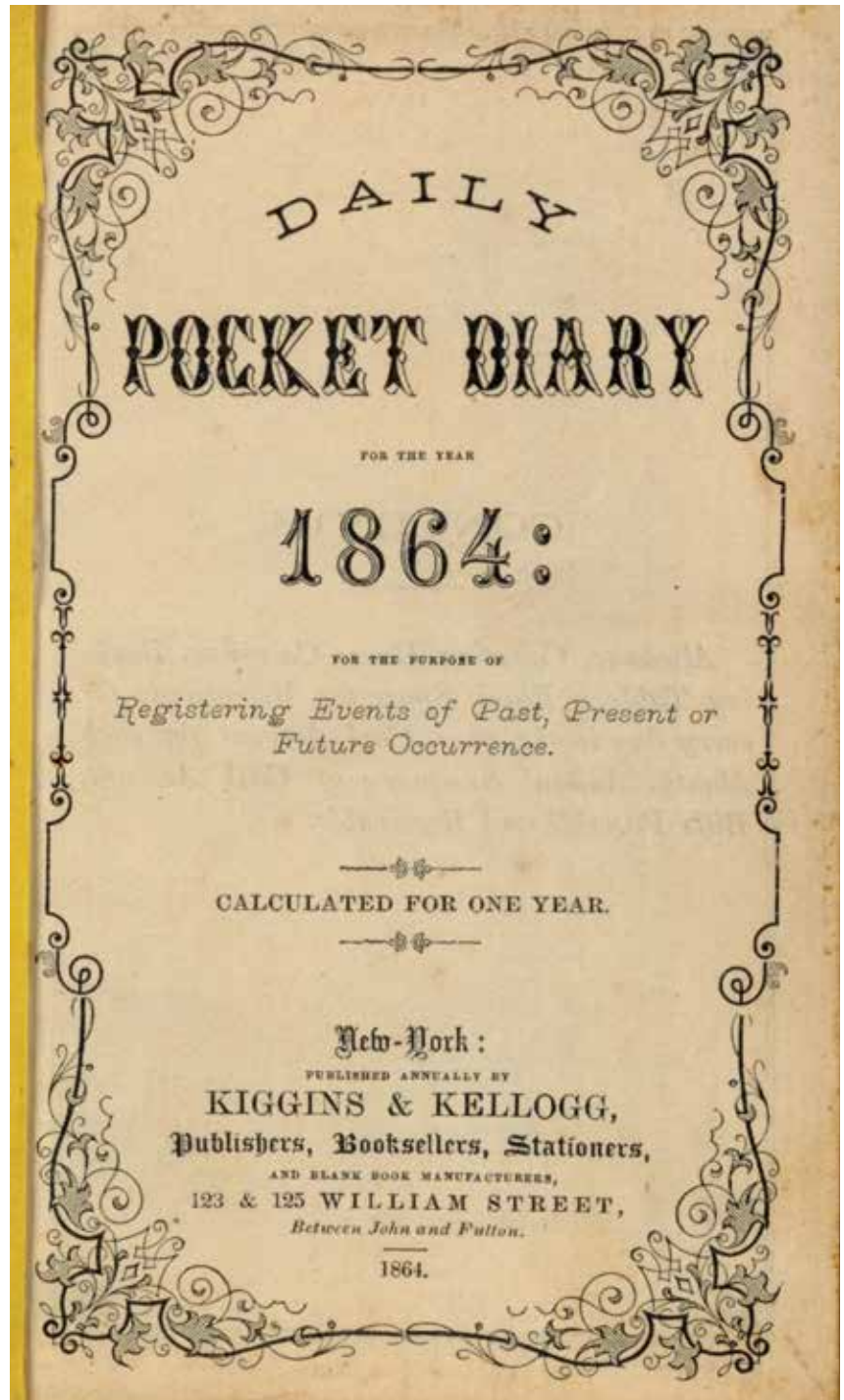


the information ordered? Next, ask students what questions they have about the information. They may wonder who Samuel J. Gibson was, or ask about prisoner of war camps in general or Andersonville in particular. If they have read some of the entries, they may have questions about the parole and exchange process for prisoners. Next, provide some context for the data by showing the students the item record and images of the diary (www.loc.gov/item/mss52410001). Perhaps they will notice the similarities between the url for the record and the item id from the spreadsheet. Looking at the images, they might notice that Gibson was writing in a date book and wonder if the dates printed match the dates Gibson was writing.

Additional context and information about the Gibson papers are located on the page documenting the collection: www.loc.gov/collections/samuel-j-gibson-papers/about-this-collection. Students may use this as a jumping off point for research about the life of a soldier during the Civil War, research about how prisoners of war were treated at the time, or about political views people held during the war. Further avenues of research are provided by the spreadsheet file itself. For example, it may be interesting to note, using a spreadsheet search function, how many times Gibson refers to “hope” and to “despair,” which may provide some insight into Gibson’s overall disposition. This type of data

mining, called “sentiment analysis” is currently performed by researchers using sophisticated software on extremely large data sets, like posts to social media accounts or sets of news stories, to understand public

opinion or identify possible sources of misinformation or hate speech. Perhaps students might research the implications of this type of data mining for political leaders, industry, or the public at large.





SOFTWARE E-RESOURCE

Campaign	Project	Item	ItemID	Asset	AssetStatus	DownloadURL	Transcription
"This Hell-upon-earth o Diary and a letter		Samuel J. Gibson diary and corres	52410002	mss52410002-1	completed	http://file.loc.gov/	Address.] Corp'l. S. 1.1 Co. B. 10th R. V.
"This Hell-upon-earth o Diary and a letter		Samuel J. Gibson diary and corres	52410001	mss52410001-31	completed	http://file.loc.gov/	May, TUESDAY, 3. 1866 Andersonville Ga. Thi
"This Hell-upon-earth o Diary and a letter		Samuel J. Gibson diary and corres	52410001	mss52410001-64	completed	http://file.loc.gov/	November, THURSDAY Confed' Military Priso
"This Hell-upon-earth o Diary and a letter		Samuel J. Gibson diary and corres	52410001	mss52410001-48	completed	http://file.loc.gov/	August, Saturday, 13. Camp Sumter Anders
"This Hell-upon-earth o Diary and a letter		Samuel J. Gibson diary and corres	52410001	mss52410001-47	completed	http://file.loc.gov/	August, SUNDAY 7. 18 to day I feel somewhat, I u
"This Hell-upon-earth o Diary and a letter		Samuel J. Gibson diary and corres	52410001	mss52410001-46	completed	http://file.loc.gov/	August, Monday, 1. 11 Last night, I attende
"This Hell-upon-earth o Diary and a letter		Samuel J. Gibson diary and corres	52410001	mss52410001-45	completed	http://file.loc.gov/	July, TUESDAY, 26, 1866 to day I feel somewhat
"This Hell-upon-earth o Diary and a letter		Samuel J. Gibson diary and corres	52410001	mss52410001-43	completed	http://file.loc.gov/	July, THURSDAY, 14. 11 Military Prison: Ander July. FRIDAY, 8.

Other avenues of data mining might include asking students to use the spreadsheet to explore the places where Gibson refers to his “little book” to gain additional information on his use of the diary. Students might also search for words like “water,” “God,” or “government” to find passages about the conditions at the prison, or Gibson’s attitudes about religion or politics. Alternatively, ask students to read one or

two of the transcribed pages, using the spreadsheet or using the online image and associated text files, and identify any themes or ideas that resonate. Using the search function on the spreadsheet, students can then explore where else these ideas appear in the diary. How might this type of analysis help connect Gibson’s experience with our own? For example, time and his perception of it are important to Gibson; many

people have expressed similar feelings about their experience of the flow of time during the current pandemic.

As always, when discussing historical documents, it may be wise to put some of the language Gibson uses in context, and help students understand the history and background of particular words, phrases, or ideas. If you try these suggestions, or a variation of them with your students, **tell us about your experience!** The Teaching with the Library of Congress Blog at www.blogs.loc.gov/teachers contains a series of posts tied to this article with another appearing during the last week of April; we invite you to comment and share your teaching strategies there. ■

The Samuel J. Gibson diary is one of many such items in the Library of Congress. Searching the Library’s website at www.loc.gov on the term “diary,” and narrowing results with the “Manuscripts/Mixed Material” facet, returns thousands of items, from the papers of George Washington to the notebooks of the Wright brothers, from account books of Frederick Douglass to the journals of Clara Barton. Many of these have been transcribed, with text versions available side-by-side with the images of the handwritten pages. Additionally, some of the datasets with transcriptions, produced from *By the People* and similar to the Samuel J. Gibson Diary and Correspondence dataset, are available for download on the Library of Congress website. They include:

- Dataset from Wm. Oland Bourne Papers; “Civil War Soldiers: ‘Disabled but not disheartened’” www.loc.gov/item/2019667237
- Datasets from Branch Rickey Papers www.loc.gov/item/2019667234
- Dataset from Elizabeth Cady Stanton Papers www.loc.gov/item/2020445592
- Dataset from Carrie Chapman Catt Papers www.loc.gov/item/2019667239
- Dataset from Rosa Parks Papers www.loc.gov/item/2020445590
- Dataset from Susan B. Anthony Papers www.loc.gov/item/2020445591



Peter DeCraene is a 2020–22 Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellow at the Library of Congress. For more information on the education programs of the Library of Congress, please visit www.loc.gov/teachers