

Teaching Civics with Primary Source Documents

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Sometimes it is more than just embarrassing to lack civic awareness. Let's take the case of Jacob Koontz, a Revolutionary War veteran living in Lebanon County, Pennsylvania, in 1816. On July 14 of that year, Koontz, apparently unaware that the president of the country was James Madison, wrote to *former* President Thomas Jefferson asking for help in securing financial payment rather than a land warrant for his wartime service, and included his original discharge papers as proof of his service.

About two weeks later, Jefferson sent a letter to Secretary of War William H. Crawford in Washington, D.C., from Jefferson's home in Virginia, and enclosed Koontz's request. In his letter, Jefferson sought to assist Koontz, but also expressed dismay that the man still believed that Jefferson was the president of the United States. Jefferson exclaimed, "I know all of the irregularities of this, but we must not be too regular to do a good act, and there is no danger of the precedent; for we shall never find another in the U.S. who shall be ignorant of the name of his president 7 years after the change."

Jefferson's letter provides a great starting point for teaching civics with primary sources. Sharing a copy of Jefferson's letter with students or colleagues may well spark a conversation about both civic literacy and responsibility.

Primary sources, such as Jefferson's letter, are materials that were created by those who participated in or witnessed the events of the past. They can include letters, reports, photographs, drawings, sound recordings, motion pictures, and artifacts, as well as other items. In recent years, the use of primary sources as teaching tools in history classes has increased dramatically. This is due, in part, to the rapidly increasing availability of facsimiles, images, and transcriptions on the World Wide Web and to encouragement from the National History Standards for their inclusion. But their usefulness can extend well beyond the study of history into virtually every subject, particularly civics—civic affairs and the rights and duties of citizens.

Although rights and duties are not tangible, primary sources that reflect and reinforce them are. They reflect events and experiences that actually occurred and introduce students to the individuals who lived them. In addition to the appeal of

primary sources in terms of their tangibility and authenticity, their physical attributes can further capture student attention. The letterhead, handwriting, special markings, size, color, texture, or other features of a document can engage students and help them to later recall information.

Ironically, most students who learn how a bill becomes a law never actually see what an official, original law looks like. Original laws, and the bills that precede them, contain details and interesting notations that help explain the legislative process and reveal the personalities of those involved. This is also true for the paper trail left by each constitutional amendment. Article V of the United States Constitution explains the amendment process, but the actual bills, letters, and certificates that remain breathe life into the procedures.

In addition to teaching content and process, select documents can also reinforce important aspects of responsible citizenship, such as voting, serving on a jury, petitioning the government, or registering for the draft. Introducing students to primary sources can help them become engaged citizens, aware of their rights, duties, and responsibilities and able to act upon these when confronted with real issues.

Jacob Koontz carried out his civic duty of serving in the military, and he exercised his First Amendment right to petition his government. But his failure to keep abreast of the changes in leadership that our system of government fosters might have cost him his pension if Jefferson had a less forgiving spirit.

In response to Koontz's letter, perhaps Jefferson did in fact "drop him a line," as his letter to the Secretary of War states. I suspect that if he did, Jefferson emphasized the importance of knowing one's rights, of following through on one's duties, and most of all, the responsibilities we share as citizens.

Note:

The document featured in this article comes from Post-Revolutionary War Papers, 1794-1811, Record Group 94, at the National Archives. You may reproduce the document in any quantity.

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Dear Sir

Monticello July 27. 16.

You will perceive that the inclosed papers of Jacob Koontz, are from a very ignorant man, who supposes I am still at Washington, and the proper person to be addressed. Under this supposition he has even forwarded his original papers on which his all depends. in rigor I ought to return them to him, but on so distant a transmission by mail they would run risks, and I would rather at once place him under the protection of your goodness by inclosing them to you, and praying you ^{to} put them into the proper channel for his relief. I know all the irregularity of this, but we must not be too regular to do a good act, and there is no danger of the precedent; for we shall never find another in the U.S. who shall be ignorant of the name of his President 7. years after the change. ~~please~~
I shall drop him a line of what I have done, & placing him under your patronage I pray you to accept assurances of my great esteem & consideration.

M^{rs}. Crawford.

W. Jefferson