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# Learning about the Civil War through Soldiers' Letters

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**We are in an era of fast-paced** telecommunications, where faxes, e-mails, cell phones and messaging services have all but replaced what is quickly becoming a lost art: letter writing. People in general are rarely exposed to letter writing on a personal level and may never experience the captivating power of written words in this format. I felt it was necessary to demonstrate the value of written letters with my students and to make an attempt to resurrect this fading practice. My focus while working on this with my students was process and product oriented. In other words, the research component was just as integral to the successful implementation of this project as the letters students would ultimately compose.

I needed a context in which to introduce this practice, one that would prove to be significant, intriguing, and hopefully unforgettable in nature. My American history classes were studying the Civil War, and I saw this as the

perfect opportunity to introduce letter writing into the curriculum. The year 2003 was Ohio's bicentennial year, and at the time I thought it would be interesting to concentrate on some of the lesser-known individuals from our state and their role in the Civil War. Therefore, we focused on letters authored by Ohio soldiers during the conflict.

## Primary Sources That Work

Before describing the Civil War letter-writing project, I would like to make a clarification regarding primary sources. Too often, primary sources are perceived as long, dry, boring documents that students will never even look at, let alone read. Some educators may espouse this unfortunate misconception as well, based on past exposure to such materials. As a result, valuable resources that serve as highly effective teaching tools go unused. I realize many educators are avid proponents of primary sources

and have great success utilizing them in their classrooms. This project is geared toward those social studies teachers and to those educators not quite convinced of what these materials can offer.

My approach to teaching history has always been one of connecting students to the past so it becomes relevant and more interesting to them. My goal is to replace cold facts and dates with personal touches that bring the subject to life, if only for a short while. As Ken Burns noted in a foreword he wrote for *Ordinary Americans*,

We must in our historical excavations be more like emotional archaeologists than clinical scientists, exposing to modern air not just the dry facts of life before us, but the moving undercurrent of real human affections and failings. History, especially personal, ordinary Americans' kind of history ... is alive, breathing, contemporary. This is the way history should be told. <sup>1</sup>

I enjoy using primary sources as supplemental materials to enhance classroom studies. Always excited and fascinated by the wealth of documentation related to average people and their role in history, I desired to convey this enthusiasm to my students. In this "bottom up" approach to learning history, students acquire a better understanding and appreciation for what is being covered because in essence they are able to find themselves in the past. Once this connection is established, research and learning take precedence over questions about relevance or comments about boredom. The desire to find out more information supersedes all else.

When primary sources are used effectively, students generally take over and run with them. This is integral to attaining and maintaining a scholarly atmosphere. Furthermore, students often cannot get enough and seek to discover more information related to what's being covered. This spawns a reciprocal process, as pupils become "teachers" sharing newly acquired knowledge; we learn from each other. In this manner, a

higher value is placed on what is learned because ownership of the project is in the student's hands. The Civil War letter-writing project provides the perfect forum for the implementation of primary sources in the classroom.

### Civil War Letter-Writing Project

Letters from the Civil War era come in a variety of styles and syntax. Some are easy to read while others are extremely difficult to transcribe. But every one of them speaks to the reader, revealing an unknown entity from another time and place. From the mundane, routine details of camp life to vivid descriptions of battles, the letters convey eyewitness accounts whose validity is unquestionable. As Colbert says, "Few eyewitnesses see it all ... yet what they see is essential. History begins with people caught in the moment-by-moment rush of events ... the eyewitness's story evokes unforgettable urgency and energy, and a sense of truth."<sup>2</sup> That true story, a more complete picture of what life during the Civil War was really like, is depicted in those bits and pieces of history. Discovering, or actually rediscovering, Civil War letters, those fragments from the past, and putting the pieces together, is the key to gaining a better understanding of that age. Most importantly, students are able to relate to the variety of emotions expressed in these primary sources; and, in essence, they *feel* history.

To begin the project, I read Union Major Sullivan Ballou's touching letter to his wife Sarah, to my students.<sup>3</sup> The eloquent manner in which he expresses his thoughts and conveys his feelings to Sarah is remarkable. The following citation is taken from a beautiful letter composed one week before the battle at First Manassas:

... I have, I know, but few and small claims upon Divine Providence, but something whispers to me—perhaps it is the wafted prayer of my little Edgar—that I shall return to my loved ones unharmed. If I do not, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on

the battlefield, it will whisper your name.

Forgive my many faults, and the many pains I have caused you. How thoughtless and foolish I have oftentimes been! How gladly would I wash out with my tears every little spot upon your happiness, and struggle with all the misfortune of this world, to shield you and my children from harm. But I cannot. I must watch you from the spirit land and hover near you, while you buffet the storms with your precious little freight, and wait with sad patience till we meet to part no more.

But, O Sarah! If the dead can come back to this earth and flit unseen around those they loved, I shall always be near you; in the garish day and in the darkest night – amidst your happiest scenes and gloomiest hours—always, always; and if there be a soft breeze upon your cheek, it shall be my breath; or the cool air fans your throbbing temple, it shall be my spirit passing by. Sarah, do not mourn me dead; think I am gone and wait for thee, for we shall meet again...

The content of this letter becomes all the more poignant when students learn that Sullivan Ballou died in that battle. A letter home was the last contact and final expression of love that Sarah would ever receive from her husband. This highly personal, gut wrenching text sets the tone for the rest of the project as students are thrust into the reality of life and death circumstances prevalent during the Civil War.

### Phase One: Research

Letters have always intrigued me specifically because, as Ken Burns affirmed, a common person, someone we all can relate to, wrote them. He further states, "Myriad voices remind us that history is not just the story of wars and generals and presidents, but of ordinary people, like you and me, who form the real fabric of our history and society."<sup>4</sup> There are plenty of primary source materials that highlight the roles Ulysses S. Grant,

Robert E. Lee and Abraham Lincoln assumed during the Civil War. But who was Sullivan Ballou? How did he die? What happened to his family? These are the types of questions generated as students begin to walk down a path seldom trod. Once hooked, they are determined to find out more and begin searching, trying to shed some light on other hidden, or in some cases forgotten, individuals who took part in the Civil War.

In an interesting juxtaposition, modern technology via the internet proved to be a valuable tool in unlocking the past. The main difficulty I

and in some cases the exact same age, composed the letters being examined. Series of letters written over a period of years also made for compelling reading. Students learned about the everyday struggles, concerns, passions, fears, and convictions held by many of the soldiers. They also gained a better understanding of why these men chose to fight, as soldiers' characters were revealed in each letter studied. Most certainly, students appreciated learning real details about battles, truths shared by men who were there often related in vivid terminology, far removed from the cold facts found in textbooks.

of correspondences. Eli, in Company F, 126<sup>th</sup> Ohio Volunteer Infantry, wrote many letters home to different family members throughout the war. Those addressed to his younger sister Emma are especially typical of sibling relationships in any era. Big brother moves from sarcasm to subtle expressions of caring and affection, as the following passage demonstrates:

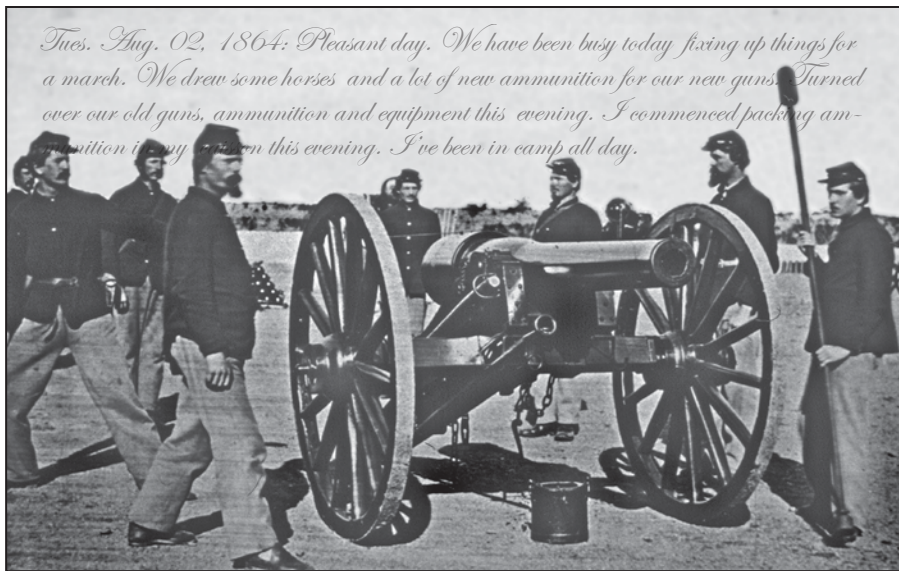
Dear sister, I seat myself to drop a few lines to let you know that I still remember you. I have not got a letter from home for about two weeks but I hope this evening there will be about one dozen for me....

Well Em I will send you a treat for New Years... I will send fifty cents—I think that will get all the candy you can eat.

I suppose you are going to school these times. If you are[,] I want you to learn fast and be a good girl for till I get home I want you to be able to be teaching yourself.<sup>5</sup>

That excerpt comes from a letter written in December 1863. On April 27th, 1864, Eli wrote a letter to his brother and closed by saying, "Tell Em I will write her a letter in a few days." Unfortunately, Emma never received another letter from her brother. Those few days were all Eli Barrick had left. The young Ohioan was killed at the Battle of the Wilderness on May 6, 1864.

Similar examples can be found in the numerous letters written by Rufus Ricksecker to his family throughout the Civil War. Rufus was a first lieutenant in the 126<sup>th</sup> Ohio Volunteer Infantry, Company G. Readers become enthralled with vivid details of day-to-day military life shared in these priceless pieces of history. From light-hearted comments about army food rations to more serious topics concerning family matters, Rufus's story comes back to life for a brief span of time. A practical man, Rufus, after informing his sister Addie about an "interesting little animal, the Army body lice," candidly remarks, "That's a very interesting subject no



*Tues. Aug. 02, 1864: Pleasant day. We have been busy today fixing up things for a march. We drew some horses and a lot of new ammunition for our new guns. Turned over our old guns, ammunition and equipment this evening. I commenced packing ammunition in my gun this evening. I've been in camp all day.*

encountered was that there was in fact too much information available on various Civil War websites. The abundance of primary sources is wonderful, but can be overwhelming for educators as well as students. For this reason and in recognition of our state's bicentennial, I asked my American history classes to limit their research to Civil War letters written by soldiers from Ohio. Even with this limitation, there was still a tremendous amount of first-hand accounts to choose from.

The excitement level was high as students located and read letters authored by Ohioans so long ago. Many were intrigued by the stories told, while other students were amazed to learn that people so close to them in age,

In addition, students were able to read letters written by a wide range of family members to those fighting in the conflict. Sometimes, after having read a series of letters containing various expressions of familial love, a sterile dispatch home informing loved ones of their family member's death concluded a sequence of letters. Interestingly, I noticed that students seemed to gravitate toward letters composed by soldiers close to their own age, especially the ones who never came home again. These were the primary sources that seemed to touch them most deeply.

For instance, when they read Eli Barrick's letters home, some students related how they had become "caught up" in the stories reflected in this series

doubt, but as I suppose my history is what you most want to know and as that is a large item it had to be put down.” The compassionate side of this young man’s character is evident in the following extract, which finds Rufus counseling his sister about previous letters she has written. The text and punctuation appear as drafted in the original.

...you must try and keep up your spirits Addie; you ought not to write (especially to a soldier boy who has troubles & trials that no other business brings forth) in the strain you did some time ago; true it did not make me home sick but still I felt as any true brother would, that if I was at home I could do a good deal to enliven you. Home sickness I think is caused in the army (to a great extent) by the kind of letter the soldier’s friends write to him; I know several cases when men’s wives are always calling on them to come home, that they are so lonesome, &c [*sic*] and some even urging their husband to desert if they can[’t] get home another way; my opinion of such writing is that it does more harm than good.<sup>6</sup>

In a letter dated January 12, 1864, Rufus displayed a perceptive nature when he proffered, “Who is the selection for President? My opinion, together with a great many here, is that ‘Old Abe’ is good for four years longer? I think he ought to be elected.” But would Rufus live to see the outcome of the presidential election? The reader remains captivated, caught up in the young lieutenant’s world.

Rufus enjoyed receiving letters from home and was extremely interested in being kept up to date with the happenings in his community. In one letter, Rufus closed by saying, “Write often as you can & give me all the news about Dover and home. Give all the boys my best wishes, but most especially the Girls, that happen to still remember...”

Alas, on September 18, 1864, Rufus Ricksecker penned his final letter home. The next day he fought gallantly and was killed during the Battle of Opequon, also called the Third Winchester. He was 22 years old. Photographs of Rufus accompany his letters. Students see a handsome young man, someone just like them in many respects, eerily staring at them from across the ages. Immediately they are thrust into the reality of the Civil War era and can more easily relate to what someone very close to their own age experienced in those times. Simply put, students are there and now they care. Incidentally, the complete collection of letters written by Eli Barrick and Rufus Ricksecker can be perused on the website [www.iwaynet.net/~lsci/](http://www.iwaynet.net/~lsci/) in addition to other officer’s recollections.

In each letter examined, long ago forgotten tales are told once more, which helps to create a deeper, more complete and meaningful understanding of history for students. As Howard Zinn notes, “If history is to be creative, to anticipate a possible future without denying the past, it should, I believe, emphasize new possibilities by disclosing those hidden episodes of the past...”<sup>7</sup> These lost stories are crucial to igniting interest; sparks grow into flames as a tone is set, one that ultimately provides students with a unique opportunity to feel history.

### Phase Two: You Are There

After they have analyzed at great length letters written during the Civil War, students are in the proper mindset to embark on the next phase of this project: they compose their own “Civil War era” letters home. For some, the task is easy, for others it is a difficult matter. Many people rarely are comfortable expressing deep feelings when they speak, let alone in writing. Letting down one’s guard, saying what is truly felt to family members, especially for teenagers, takes a lot of courage.

Through several years of implementing this lesson, I have found that student letters cover a wide spectrum of styles and emotional levels. Some draft

light-hearted accounts about their lives during the war, while others choose to write moving “last” letters home. Some even compose a series of correspondences that span a specific period of time. Once students are in this realm of historical fiction, any style and format is acceptable. *What* is written takes precedence over *how* the letters are composed; structure matters little; meaningful content is my goal. The only rule is that historical accuracy must be maintained, such as battle dates, outcomes, where particular army companies were encamped, when and so on.

Naturally, there are many unique ways educators can enhance this particular assignment. Quill pens with inkwells, parchment or unlined paper, and various relics from the era all serve as effective mood setters. Music of the period is an especially useful motivational tool. Of course, teachers know what works best for their pupils. Utilize anything that assists students on their journey to the past.

I am fortunate to share a cross-curricular collaboration with Louise Lowenstein, a superb English educator I have been teaching with for 15 years. Since this project encompasses her subject area as well, she has provided valuable assistance over the years. Louise is able to focus on letter styles, syntax, grammar, transcribing, phonics, etc., with the students. Once they understand these aspects of letter writing, students are better prepared to create more authentic pieces. This social studies-English connection helps establish a solid foundation for the Civil War letter-writing project. A realistic timeframe for this project varies from three days to one week, depending upon how much time is devoted to research.

When finished, students have the option to share their letters with the rest of the class. Usually about 50 percent decide to read what they have composed; everyone usually turns in their letters. Be forewarned. Student letters may elicit varying levels of emotional responses from some individuals. The humbling power of written words affects

people in different ways. Patience and the help of friends may be necessary in making it all the way through some of the letters being read.

From the outset, I make it clear that this assignment does not even have to be turned in if it makes students uncomfortable. In my opinion, grades on this type of work are unimportant. The experience is what matters most, as John Dewey wrote in 1938. “Just as no man lives or dies to himself, so no experience lives and dies to itself. Wholly independent of desire or intent, every experience lives on in further experiences.”<sup>8</sup> The experience is what will remain in

the minds of my pupils long after this assignment is completed, not their grade. As the reader will see, students concur with this observation.

### Student Reactions

Due to the highly personal nature of the letters written by my students, I will not share their contents. However, in order to fully appreciate the impact this project has had on my pupils, I felt it was necessary to include their voices as an assessment tool. Below are some of their responses to the assignment.

These reactions come from students with a variety of ability and matu-

riety levels. I think this lesson transcends those components of teaching, and thereby allows students to achieve at their own rate. As Dewey asserted, every experience is a moving force which lives on in further experiences.<sup>9</sup> In this assignment, each participant came away with something that touched him or her in a unique manner.

Oscar Wilde once quipped, “the only duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.”<sup>10</sup> Considering the memorable teaching and learning experiences fostered in this project, I believe he was onto something. My students were able to connect with the past and to feel history. Therein lies the success of the Civil War letter-writing project. 📖

## Student Reactions



“We read letters from soldiers that were very touching. I would hate to say goodbye to my family on a piece of paper.”

—Jennifer

“The letters really brought the reality of the war and its consequences home to us.” —William

“Writing the letters enabled us to see how hard it was for those who actually wrote their last letters home. It was emotionally difficult to write how you truly feel and it would be even harder if it was your last goodbye to the ones you love with all your heart.” —Sarah

“The Civil War letters put you in the mind-set of a person who was really there and gave a glimpse into the thoughts of a soldier, someone who knew that they could die in any given battle.” —Josh

“When we studied the Civil War letters it was an experience that I will never forget. The letters were heartfelt, yet left you with a tragic mind-set because they described love for family members that may never be seen again. Some of the letters made me feel sad while others made me extremely happy. These different emotions helped tie me to other people’s emotions from the past. As I wrote my letter, I couldn’t help but put myself in an American soldier’s current situation in Iraq, and the experience made me cry.” —Lajuanda

“The Civil War letters were interesting and helped me visualize, actually feel like I was there. They made me think how I would feel if I had to go through what those soldiers did. In fact, writing my own last letter home was actually the most difficult assignment I have ever done in my entire school career. I felt like I was there and had to imagine all the things I would say if I didn’t think I was going home again. Tears flowed as I wrote my letter and it was very difficult reading it to the class.”

—Brandon

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### Notes

1. Linda R. Monk, *Ordinary Americans* (Alexandria, Va.: Close Up Publishing, 1994), v.
2. David Colbert, *Eyewitness To America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), xxix.
3. Monk, 87-88.
4. *Ibid.*, v.
5. The letters of Eli Barrick are held by Michael Robey and are reprinted with permission.
6. The letters of Rufus Ricksecker are held by Rare Books and Manuscripts, the Ohio State University Libraries; they were transcribed by Eric T. Davis, the 126th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, and are used with permission.
7. Howard Zinn, *The Twentieth Century: A People’s History* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1984), xi.
8. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1938), 27.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Robert Andrews, Mary Biggs, and Mike Seidel, *The Columbia World of Quotations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) Retrieved July 16, 2003, from [www.bartleby.com/66/34/64334.html](http://www.bartleby.com/66/34/64334.html).