

A painting of a beach scene. The sky is a deep blue. The beach is sandy and light-colored. In the background, there is a red building. The text "Civil War Letters" is overlaid on the painting.

Civil War Letters

Ideas for lesson plans

List of Letters for Today:

from various sources

- Letter from B. Musser, 102nd Regt., Co. H, 1862 December 27, 93-068, IV-B-6, Box 1, Federal Additions, Civil War Collection
- Letter from the Brigham Family Papers, Small Collections, III-D-2, Folder 1
- Letter from Achilles V. Clark regarding the Fort Pillow massacre, Confederate Collection, Box 8, IV-B-2, accession number 301

List of letters for Today:

from the Bostick Family Papers

- Abe Bostick to Catherine Halbert, 10/5/1861, Box 1 Folder 10
- Abe Bostick to Margaret Bostick, 12/22/1861, Box 1 Folder 15
- Abe Bostick to Margaret Bostick, 3/17/1862, Box 1 Folder 18
- Thomas H. Bostick to Margaret Bostick, 6/30/1862, Box 1 Folder 48
- Thomas H. Bostick to Margaret Bostick, 7/31/1864, Box 1 Folder 54
- Col. John Goodner to Mrs. H.P. Bostick, 9/12/1862, Box 1 Folder 63

Civil War Letters

were not censored...

Why would authorities want to censor soldiers' letters?

What would they remove, and why?

Were soldiers' letters during World War I and II censored? What about other wars? What information might be censored?

What did they use to write the letters?

- Pencils?
- Quill pens?
- Paper calendars (day books)
- Blue paper (1850s and 1860s)
- Other types of paper?

Why does very old paper last longer than newer paper?

What were their motives?

According to **James McPherson**, after reading thousands of soldiers' letters and diaries, he came to the following conclusions regarding their motives and endurance:

- **Fervent patriotism**
- **Belief in the righteousness of their cause**
- **Cohesion of community-based regimental companies**
- **Religious beliefs that helped them face death**
- **Victorian cultural values of duty, honor, courage, manhood**

Questions for younger students:

- Which side did the author fight for, and how do you know?
- When and where was the letter written?
- Who is the author writing to, and how might this affect his message?
- Did the author include any illustrations, and if so, what did he draw, and why?

Questions, continued

- Did the authors spell his words correctly?
- Which battles (if any) was he involved in, and how do you know?
- How does he portray the enemy?
- Does the author talk about conditions in the camp?
- What surprised you about the letter?

Questions for older students:

- What was the importance of the battles that the author took part in?
- What does he say about the meaning of the war, and why he is fighting?
- What does he say about the African Americans, and can you determine what his views are on slavery and the lives of African Americans?
- What slang is used in the letter, and what does it mean?
- What didn't you see in the letter that you might have expected?

Questions, continued...

- Can you sense whether or not his morale is high or low? Does he feel frustrated or eager to fight?
- When was the letter written, and how (and why) would this affect what he was saying?
- Was the author well-educated or barely literate? How can you tell? Would this affect his perspective on the war or what he was saying in the letter?
- Is a letter automatically considered 100% accurate, even if the author was an eyewitness to an event?
- How would you attempt to determine its accuracy?

Example

from the Bostick Family
Papers, letter from Abe
Bostick to his sister, Big
Sewell, Virginia, October
5, 1861

“...although I believe we
would whip them (the
Yankees), it would cost too
many lives to suit General
Lee. He values the lives of his
men even to a fault.”

Quotes from James M. McPherson, Civil War historian

"Union frontal assaults at Spotsylvania, Cold Harbor, and Petersburg gave Grant a reputation as a 'butcher' This description is distorted. The campaign turned out to be one of attrition, but that was more Lee's doing than Grant's....if any general deserved the label 'butcher,' it was Lee." (page 113 of *This Mighty Scourge*)

"Sherman tried to conduct his campaigns to avoid another Shiloh. Of seventeen Civil War army commanders on both sides, Sherman had the second-lowest percentage of casualties in his armies (Robert E. Lee's army had the highest)." (page 116 of *This Mighty Scourge*)

Activities for beyond the classroom

- How would you go about finding out what happened to the letter writer, other than consulting the internet?

How would you start?

What do we have at TSLA?

- Service records
- Census records
- Pension records (widow's pension)
- Death records
- Civil War Veterans Questionnaires
- Wills and inventories
- Other libraries and archives

Activities for beyond the classroom

Write your own letter as if you were a Civil War soldier.....

- Consult your list of Civil War slang!
- Decide if you are Confederate or Union, and where you are fighting!
- Who would you write to? Why?

Useful links regarding letters of the Civil War

- http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/classroom/lesson_letters.html
- <http://library.duke.edu/specialcollections/bingham/guides/cwdocs.html>
- <http://www.vmi.edu/archives/Manuscripts/msguide2.html>
- <http://etext.virginia.edu/civilwar/>