
Primary Source Comprehension: Letters and Journals

Reporting Category: United States History to 1865

Topic: Skills, Civil War: 1861 to 1865

Primary SOLs: USI.1, USI.9

Materials: Examples of letters and journal entries; exercises.

Directions: Students will read letters and journal entries from the American Civil War in Prince William County and the surrounding area in July 1861. Upon completion of reading the provided materials, the students will use primary sources to create their own newspaper article detailing the events of July 1861.

Document Context: Handwritten letters were the only form of direct communication during the American Civil War. Journals were written as events transpired and were later used to create historic primary source volumes about the events of the Civil War. Newspapers provide different perspectives regarding the events of the time. Letters and journals provide a rich history of the events and details in a person's life. The journal entry below was written by a soldier. Letters and journals are an effective way of expressing one's thoughts and feelings.

Document 1: *"Before quitting this account of that first, and so all-important, battle of Manassas...we will relate how we fought our way against and at some points actually into the first Michigan Regiment, the flag of which was captured by James Glenn of our company, whose name was inscribed upon it when it was sent to Richmond. Our charging into that fine fighting command made a very close and stubborn contest between us...with fixed bayonets and clubbed guns in the end. Our difficult and dangerous work of trying to persuade them to quit the field was indeed hard of accomplishment, and cost us [many] lives, but we did finally put them to rout, and our victory, because of its disastrous results, was thereby the greater, and, in war terms, the more highly honorable. At that time, or only a few moments later, what may be termed the slaughter of a regiment, or battalion of red-breeched Zouaves from Brooklyn, New York, immediately in front of the 27th Regiment, was a clear case, on their part, of self-imposed butchery."* - C. A. Fonerdon

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Document 2: *"The [camp] of our [unit] was on the extreme left near the Henry house as it was called. Mrs. Henry, who lived in it, was so very old and infirm she refused to move out of it...Mrs. Henry's house during the day became a...point of great importance and was much torn up by shot and shell, by one of which she was killed."* – Charles Minor Blackford

Document 3: A sketch of Mrs. Henry's house after the battle



Exercise:

Using primary sources, write a letter (2-3 paragraphs) to your family back home about what you witnessed during and after the Battle of First Manassas. How would you have described the events? What did you see, hear, and smell? How did you feel before, during, and after the battle? What is most important that you want to tell your family?