



AMERICA ON THE WORLD STAGE

ALBEMARLE | CHARLOTTESVILLE | GREENE | MADISON | ORANGE

A
TEACHING
AMERICAN
HISTORY
GRANT PROGRAM

PROJECT TITLE: Letters, Windows Into the Past	
AUTHOR: Christine Waldron	GRADE LEVEL & SUBJECT: 2 nd Grade Social Studies and Language Arts

SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. **Primary Investigative Question(s)**: How were letters delivered during the Age of Lincoln during the mid-19th century? How can students use letters to learn about life during the Age of Lincoln?
2. **Contextual Essay**

The true story of our past rests in what was written at that very moment by the common people as well as the important figures of the time. Learning about history through the words written during this period by these people from various walks of life, develops a deeper understanding of what was really happening in our country and why. Writing letters in the nineteenth century was the only form of communication between people who lived or were apart from each other. By 1860, over one-third of the citizenry had moved from their birthplaces. “The fact that letters and letter writing have played an enormous role in American history is entirely unsurprising. America is a country of immigrants, leaving loved ones behind in the search for a better life, a country of pioneers, setting out for open land despite the appeal of home and familiarity, a vast country, stretching nearly 3,000 miles from coast to coast. Communication across the distance that separates friends and families has always been a necessary part of life in America, and despite modern developments in technology, letter writing has continued to occupy a large part of that communication.” (Burke, 2005)

Letters written to Abraham Lincoln are even more fascinating when you learn that he was president during a time “in which ordinary Americans could still reach out to their president, and in many cases expect – and receive - a personal reply; of a government that grew at breathtaking speed to meet the requirements of a national emergency but somehow maintained a long-since vanished simplicity and accessibility.” (Holzer, 1993). Many young school age children have heard or read about the story where Lincoln was written to (before he became president) by an eleven-year old girl named Grace Bedell who advised him to grow whiskers to improve his personal appearance. Then two months later, he appears in her hometown aboard a train that was taking him to Washington for his inauguration. Lincoln announced “Some three months ago I received a letter from a young lady here; it was a very pretty letter, and she advised me to let my whiskers grow, as it would improve my personal appearance; acting partly upon her suggestion, I have done so; and now, if she is here, I would like to see her.” Lincoln made his way forward and “amid yells of delight from the excited crowd” planted “several hearty kisses” on her cheek. This story would prove that even a young voice speaking about maybe an unimportant matter can have an

impact if written in a “pretty” way. Students can begin to see the connection here to the written words of persuasion and the value in writing (or saying) words in a way that can sway a person to think or act upon their wishes or desires. This is the beginning of an understanding that the common person can have a say and be heard in a democracy that is built on being shaped by the people. What could be even more powerful for children to read and see is the letter written to Abraham Lincoln by Mrs. Horace Mann (April 5, 1864) which is a petition of the children of Concord, Massachusetts, that the president will free all slave children. “They have been delighted with the idea of speaking to our good President & of giving one cent or more, for the benefit of the poor little slaves—195 signatures.” (Holzer, p.101). Children can see what some children of that time were feeling and writing is how they were noticed. Abraham responded with a letter back that included, “Please tell these little people I am very glad their young hearts are so full of just and generous sympathy, and that, while I have not the power to grant all they ask, I trust they will remember that God has, and that, it seems, He wills to do it.” Children can feel and experience the emotion of the time period and realize that they too can influence and cause an important, famous person to react. This inspires young people to become writers and demonstrates the power of a petition and/or letter.

Learning about how those words traveled through history, develops a sense of communication and the importance of it through the events of our past. Our postal history is a rich resource for the language arts and social studies curriculum. Examining how the postal service began and evolved will develop the understanding of how the conveyance of letters and intelligence was essential to our country's cause of liberty. Our country's immediate need to communicate brought about new technology that would improve service, with steamboats, trains and automobiles in the nineteenth century; and planes, letter sorting machines, and automation in the 20th century. The disagreements between northern and southern states were threatening the unity of the nation. The Civil War's (1861-1865) mobilization of regiments caused huge amounts of correspondence, with an estimated 180,000 letters each day flowing between the battlefield and the home front. The federal government was afraid that when the southern states separated they would try to pull California onto their side, along with all the state's gold. At the time, the only land mail route connecting East and West ran through southern states. Congress encouraged freight businessmen to create a faster mail line that would stay out of the south. Known as the Central Route, the new path stretched from St. Joseph, Missouri, to San Francisco, California, and crossed through Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and Nevada. Using young riders and swift ponies along this route, the mail traveled more than 1,950 miles in under 10 days. The first trip was made April 3, 1860. The riders would carry the mail between stations that were 10 miles apart. At each station the rider would switch to a fresh horse and every 30 miles a new rider would take over. Because speed was so important, letters had to be short and light. The fastest delivery was in March 1861, when President Abraham Lincoln's inaugural address was carried from St. Joseph to Sacramento in 7 days and 17 hours. It was very expensive to send letters by Pony Express. By October 1861, the transcontinental telegraph was in place and messages could be sent even faster. The telegraph put the Pony Express out of business only 18 months after it started! Fast moving steam boats were cutting-edge technology in 1811 and they began traveling the rivers, replacing packet boats, rowboats, and rafts as a means to carry the mail. Steamboats were soon replaced by the expansion of railroads. During our country's westward expansion and battles, letters were lifelines of communication over time and space. The Post Office Department became the communications system that helped bind the nation together and subsidized the development of every major form of transportation. It funded post routes that instituted services to benefit all residents of the country.

“Throughout the last hundred years...observers have lamented the fact that people don't write letters anymore. Yet letters have described most of the century's major events, have reflected or reflected upon most of its social and cultural trends, have captured most of its political passions, and have been written by most of its principal figures. We may think we've heard the whole story, but that story resonates more

deeply when we read the century's letters. Part of the reason for that resonance is the immediacy of letters. Letters are what history sounds like when it is still part of everyday life." (Burke, 2005). To understand the big picture of the past, we must look into this "window" of letters, answering questions about how, what, why, when and who to see how all the events interrelated. This cause and effect understanding can then be applied to the present and future events that will shape our world.

3. **Annotated Bibliography**

Burke, Kathryn (2005). *Letter Writing in America*.

Retrieved February 22, 2011, from <http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/letterwriting/index.html>

Summary: This article is the product of a Spring 2005 internship with the Smithsonian National Postal Museum by Intern Kathryn Burke. It explores the place of letter writing in American history, and supports the importance of its place in history education.

Holzer, Harold (1993). *Dear Mr. Lincoln – Letters to the President*.

Massachusetts. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company

Summary: This is a wonderful compilation of letters written to Abraham Lincoln, with very little editing and some of his replies from 1809-1865.

Holzer, Harold (1998). *The Lincoln Mailbag – America Writes to the President (1861-1865)*.

Illinois. Southern Illinois University Press

Summary: This is the second volume of citizen correspondence to America's sixteenth president. These are letters that were omitted from the first volume, *Dear Mr. Lincoln – Letters to the President*.

The United States Postal Service: An American History, 1775-2006.

Retrieved March 5, 2011, from <http://www.usps.com/postalhistory/welcome.htm>

Summary: An 84-page illustrated booklet that details history of the United States Postal Service with a forward written by Postmaster General, John E. Potter. This introduces you to people, events, and developments affecting postal and national history, which includes great period photographs and maps. It includes very detailed information about the 20th century and postal reorganization and postmasters general of current time periods.

Historian, United States Postal Service (August, 2010). *Overland Mail to California in the 1850's*.

Retrieved March 5, 2011, from http://www.usps.com/postalhistory/_pdf/overland-mail.pdf

Summary: This article gives a brief overview of the first overland mail routes to California and outlines the various issues and struggles as they developed from the time period of 1840 to 1860.