
Primary Source Comprehension: Letters and Journals

Reporting Category: Virginia Studies

Topic: Civil War and Postwar Eras

Primary SOLs: VS7 (B), VS7 (C)

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: *"At 4.30 PM I rode over the field near the Henry House where we had been fighting, and saw the effects of battle for the first time. Dead and wounded men lay about on every side; broken muskets, pieces of clothing, dead horses, disabled cannon were scattered about. We found men in uniform of the New York Fire Zouaves, the Marines, the Seventy-ninth Highlanders, and the Fourteenth New York Regiment. To the wounded we gave water and had some of them sent to the hospitals." – William Minor Owen, soldier*

Document 2: *"On Saturday evening about 7 o'clock my uncle, William Wilkins came to my mother and insisted on taking her and us children to his house for the night as fighting would begin during the night. Mother said, 'If you think so, I will get the children's clothes for Sunday School and I will go.' He replied, 'They will not need any clothes for Sunday School for there will be no Sunday School tomorrow.'*

PRINCE WILLIAM

Historic Preservation

“He was right, for 2 o’clock Sunday morning the Northern Army began pouring in about fifty feet from where my mother had just left. At Manassas they met the Southern Army from Richmond and the fighting began.

“On July 21st, Sunday, 1861 I sat on the hill side across the road from old Sudley Church and watched the firing of the muskets and the cannons, and the falling men. In a short time the army wagons began coming by piled as high as anyone would pile up wood, with the bodies of dead men that had been killed that day. They were taken to Sudley Church cemetery and dumped in a pit prepared for them.

“The next morning (Monday) my mother went to our home. It was desolate. Carpets and all furniture were out and gone. We never saw any of it again, or anything else. The old farm well in the back yard was almost full of everything that would go in it. Such as china ware, cooking utensils, flat irons, and every thing you can imagine used in a family was thrown in it. Of course everything was broken. How we all cried over it; and no prospects of replacing any of it.”—Laura Thornberry, civilian

Document 3: A wartime image of Laura Thornberry’s house



Exercise:

Using the above documents, create your own newspaper article (1-2 paragraphs) telling the readers back home about what the Manassas battlefield looked like after the battle there on July 21, 1861. What do you think the battlefield looked like and smelled like? What information do you want to share with your readers?