
Primary Source Comprehension: Letters and Journals

Reporting Category: Reading and Comprehension

Topic: Communication and Multimodal Literacies, Reading, Writing and Research

Primary SOLs: 3.5, 3.7, 3.8, 3.9, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7, 4.8, 5.4, 5.5, 5.6, 5.7, 5.8

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 Text: *"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. I met Gen. Jackson riding about the field and spoke to him of the events of the day. He had been slightly wounded in the hand and had it bound up in his handkerchief. He was a very quiet, plain looking man, dressed in a blue military coat, and wore the shoulder-straps of a colonel in the United States Army. His cap was of the old army pattern, worn during the Mexican War-blue cloth, flat on the top."* – William Minor Owen, soldier

"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

PRINCE WILLIAM

Historic Preservation

pit prepared for them. My Father, John F. Thornberry, Grandfather of Westwood Hugh, was in that great battle, was wounded and disabled for service any more. My father and mother with five little children (I was one of them) lived across the road from the church and two and a half miles from Manassas. 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.'

"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.

"The next morning (Monday) my mother went to our home. It was desolate. She with us children left it Saturday evening as we had lived in it for 15 or 20 years, and there was not an article of anything in it. Ten men had bled to death in mother's bedroom the night before. 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

Exercise:

Using the above primary sources, 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?