

Interpreting a Primary Source Document

Thomas Jefferson's Letter, dated October 10, 1812, to Jeremiah Goodman, overseer at Poplar Forest from 1811 to 1815 *

Time

- * 45 minutes

Preparation

- * Print out and photocopy letter and transcription for student use.
- * Print out and photocopy document analysis for student use.
- * Read "Teacher's Notes" on interpreting Thomas Jefferson's Letter, dated October 10, 1812, to Jeremiah Goodman, overseer at Poplar Forest from 1811 to 1815

Materials Needed

- * Poplar Forest document and transcription
- * Blank paper for students
- * Pens or pencils
- * Photocopied copies of document analysis

Objectives

- * Students will be able to discover information about Thomas Jefferson and his retreat home at Poplar Forest by analyzing a primary source.

Methods

- * Teacher explains to students that history as we know it today comes from primary sources such as letters, maps, newspapers, journals, and artifacts of earlier time periods. Teacher tells students that they are going to be Poplar Forest historians and see what they can learn about life at Poplar Forest and Thomas Jefferson by interpreting the letter he wrote in 1812 to his overseer, Mr. Goodman.

Options for Teaching

- * Teachers can discuss the document with the entire class; or they can split the class up into groups and have each group discuss the document for about 15 minutes, and then regroup as a whole class and share their findings with the class.

Enrichment

- * Use this primary source document and others to promote research skills development. Have students research the author's time period, his life, his accomplishments, the issue of slavery, the economics of the time period, or the government of the era. Research investigation of primary sources will allow students to examine the period, consider all the evidence, and draw their own conclusions about the time period based on their findings. Have students use the written and/or oral word to present their findings.

- * Have students rewrite the letter, using correct grammar, punctuation, and comprehension.

- * The original letter is in the Historic Collection of the Corporation for Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest. It may be used by teachers for educational purposes in the Lesson Plan, but may not be reproduced otherwise without permission of the Corporation.

Thomas Jefferson's Letter, dated October 10, 1812, to Jeremiah Goodman, overseer at Poplar Forest from 1811 to 1815

Dear Sir

Monkheells Oct. 10. 12.

A fall which I got from my horse ^{a fortnight ago} by the breaking of a girth, & by which I have received considerable hurt inwardly, will prevent my being with you by the middle of the month as I had intended. The external swelling is subsiding, but very slowly, so as to render the time when I may venture to travel uncertain. In the mean time Chisolm will proceed to do the plastering of the house, or he will not finish this season. We expect Reuben Perry to whom a summons was sent to attend our court on Monday (the 12th) with James Hubbard as a counsellor with him Chisolm will return, say in all next week. In the mean time 100 bushels of lime must be got of Mr. Clarke and a load of it brought home & put into the loghouse near the millstone house. About 200 bushels of very clean gritty sand will also be wanting. The wagon had better have light reiver loam of this from Lynchburg as it carries the wheat here. I do not know whether the sand at Blacksburg where the road crosses it is clean & gritty. If it is it will be most convenient. Chisolm had better lodge in the large room below which should be cleared out for him. He can use some of my bedding but for sheets. I think we must get some oylcloths at Lynchburg & have a pair made immediately. The meat laid by for me must be used for him. You may either have his dinner given him at his own room or with you as you please. I do not wish to disturb your own convenience as to that. Yourself and Mr. Darnell will have to furnish him one hand to make his mother & attend on him. Be so good as to do every thing needful to expedite him till Term, which I hope may be not long after him. Accept my best wishes.

J. Goodman.

Th. Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson's Letter, dated October 10, 1812, to Jeremiah Goodman, overseer at Poplar Forest from 1811 to 1815

October 10, 1812

A fall which I got from my horse a fortnight ago by the breaking of a girth, & by which I have received considerable hurt inwardly, will prevent my being with you by the middle of the month as I had intended. The external swelling is subsiding, but very slowly, so as to render the time when I may venture to travel uncertain. In the mean time Chisolm will proceed to do the plaistering of the house, or he will not finish this season. We expect Reuben Perry to whom a summons was sent to attend our court on Monday (the 12th.) with Jame Hubbard as a witness. With him Chisolm will return, say in all next week. In the mean time 100. bushels of lime must be got of Mr. Clarke and a load of it brought home & put into the log house near the dwelling house. About 200 bushels of very clear gritty sand will also be wanting. The waggon had better bring light return loads of this from Lynchburg as it carries the wheat there. I do not know whether the sand at Blackwater where the road crosses it is clean & gritty. If it is it will be most convenient. Chisolm had better lodge in the large room below which should be cleaned out for him. He can use some of my bedding, but for sheets I think we must get some oznaburgs at Lynchburg & have a pair made immediately. The meat laid by for me must be used for him. You may either have his dinner given him at his own room or with you as you please. I do not wish to disturb your own convenience as to that. Yourself and Mr. Darnell will have to furnish him one hand to make his mortar & attend on him. Be so good as to do every thing needful to expedite him till I come, which I hope may be not long after him. Accept my best wishes.

Mr. Goodman

Th. Jefferson

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Thomas Jefferson's Letter, dated October 10, 1812, to Jeremiah Goodman, overseer at Poplar Forest from 1811 to 1815

Answer these questions:

1. What is the date of the document?
2. Who is the author of the document?
3. Who is the author writing to and what does this individual do for the author?
4. What has happened to the author that has delayed his departure?
5. List three things the author said that you think are important.
6. Why do you think the letter was composed?
7. Underline the evidence in the letter that helps you know why it was written.
8. What evidence in the letter would help you make a reasonable deduction in dating the letter had it been undated?
9. List several things the document tells you about life in the author's time.
10. Write a reply to the author, asking questions for addition information or for clarification of something you do not understand.
11. Make a list of the individuals mentioned in the letter. Can you determine each individual's occupation or status? Add that information to your list. Where might you find that information if you could not find the evidence in the letter?
12. What inferences can you draw from this letter about the author and his time period?
13. The letter mentions lime, sand, and mortar. What would these materials be used for? How would these materials be used?
14. The letter mentions a city near the plantation. See if you can locate it on a Virginia map.
15. Use a dictionary or other resources to determine the meaning of these vocabulary words in the content of the author's letter:
 - fortnight
 - plastering (plastering)
 - shorn (swear)
 - oznabrigs

Interpreting a Primary Source Document - Teacher Notes

Thomas Jefferson's Letter, dated October 10, 1812, to Jeremiah Goodman, overseer at Poplar Forest from 1811 to 1815 *

Interpretation of Documents

What was life like at Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest? Historians use primary sources to answer questions about the past. Primary sources are original documents or artifacts that tell us about the past: types of primary resources include personal papers, diaries and letters, business records, maps, photographs, drawings, broadsides (advertisements and posters), manuscripts, census records, and objects of the time period. Primary source documents are created by individuals during or immediately following an event. The individual may have witnessed the event and recorded the event or their reaction to the event. Secondary sources are those created by individuals not present at the event or distanced by time from the event. Secondary sources often make use of primary sources.

Letters written by Jefferson, his family, and the enslaved workers survive today. The information in these primary source documents helps build the history of Poplar Forest and the activities that took place here. See what your students can learn about life at Poplar Forest and about Jefferson from this letter written by Jefferson to his overseer, Mr. Goodman.

Overseers such as Jeremiah Goodman managed Jefferson's plantation, supervised the enslaved workers, and reported to Jefferson on a regular basis. Jefferson was very involved in the management of his plantations and wrote detailed instructions to the overseers, to the carpenters and the brick masons.

Annotate copy of letter:

October 10, 1812

A fall which I got from my horse a fortnight ago by the breaking of a girth, & by which I have received considerable hurt inwardly, will prevent my being with you by the middle of the month as I had intended. The external swelling is subsiding, but very slowly, so as to render the time when I may venture to travel uncertain. In the mean time Chisolm [Hugh Chisolm, Jefferson's mason] will proceed to do the plaistering of the house, or he will not finish this season. We expect Reuben Perry [a carpenter] to whom a summons was sent to attend our court on Monday (the 12th.) with Jame Hubbard [one of Jefferson's slaves] as a witness. With him Chisolm will return, say in all next week. In the mean time 100. bushels of lime must be got of Mr. Clarke and a load of it brought home & put into the log house near the dwelling house. About 200 bushels of very clear gritty sand will also be wanting. The waggon had better bring light return loads of this from Lynchburg as it carries the wheat there. I do not know whether the sand at Blackwater where the road crosses it is clean & gritty. If it is it will be most convenient. Chisolm had better lodge in the large room below which should be cleaned out for him. He can use some of my bedding, but for sheets I think we must get some oznaburgs at Lynchburg & have a pair made immediately. The meat laid by for me must be used for him. You may either have his dinner given him at his own room or with you as you please. I do not wish to disturb your own convenience as to that. Yourself and Mr. Darnell will have to furnish him one hand to make his mortar & attend on him. Be so good as to do every thing needful to expedite him till I come, which I hope may be not long after him. Accept my best wishes.

Mr. Goodman

Th. Jefferson